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AUTHOR Fein, Robert A.; Vossekuil, Bryan; Pollack, William S.; Borum, Randy; Modzeleski, William; Reddy, Marisa

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ABSTRACT

Since June 1999, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service have been working as a team to better understand--and ultimately help prevent--school shootings in America. Findings indicated that incidents of targeted violence in school were rarely impulsive; that the students who perpetrated attacks usually planned them out in advance with planning behavior that was often observable; and that, prior to most attacks, other children knew that the attack was to occur. This document uses these findings to create a process for identifying, assessing, and managing students who may pose a threat of targeted violence in schools. Eight chapters include: (1) "Introduction: Threat Assessment and the Prevention of Targeted School Violence"; (2) "Creating Climates of School Safety: A Foundation For Reducing School Violence"; (3) "Key Findings of the Safe School Initiative's Study of Targeted School Violence"; (4) "Implementing a School Threat Assessment Process"; (5) "Conducting a School Threat Assessment"; (6) "Managing a Threatening Situation"; (7) "Action Plans for School Leaders: Creating a Safe and Connected School Climate and Implementing a Threat Assessment Program"; and (8) "Conclusion: Threat Assessment as a Decision-Making Tool". An appendix contains a list of annotated resources. (Contains 24 references and 2 resource Web sites.) (RT)

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THREAT ASSESSMENT IN SCHOOLS:

A GUIDE TO MANAGING THREATENING SITUATIONS AND TO CREATING SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATES

UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE AND
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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May 2002

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THREAT ASSESSMENT IN SCHOOLS: A GUIDE TO MANAGING THREATENING SITUATIONS AND TO CREATING SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATES

UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE

AND

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

by

Robert A. Fein, Ph.D.
Director
National Violence Prevention and Study Center

Bryan Vossekuil
Director
National Violence Prevention and Study Center

William S. Pollack, Ph.D.
Director, National Violence Prevention and Study Center
Assistant Clinical Professor
Harvard Medical School / McLean Hospital

Randy Borum, Psy.D.
Associate Professor
University of South Florida

William Modzeleski
Director
Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program
U. S. Department of Education

Marisa Reddy, Ph.D.
Chief Research Psychologist and Research Coordinator
National Threat Assessment Center
U. S. Secret Service

WASHINGTON, D. C.

May 2002

Disclaimer

The findings, conclusions, and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Education or the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

Joint message From the Secretary, U.S. Department of Education and from the Director, U.S. Secret Service:

Since June 1999, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service have been working as a team to try to better understand – and ultimately help prevent – school shootings in America. When we began this collaboration nearly three years ago, we did not know what information we might uncover in the course of our joint study on targeted violence in schools, known as the *Safe School Initiative*. However throughout our collaboration, our two agencies have focused on one common goal: to develop accurate and useful information about prior school attacks that could help prevent some future ones from occurring.

We believe the results of this effort have given schools and communities real cause for hope. Through the *Safe School Initiative*, staff from the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program and the U.S. Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center have found that some school attacks may be preventable. The companion report to this document, *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*, details findings from the *Safe School Initiative* and includes several key findings relevant to prevention efforts. In particular, the *Safe School Initiative* findings indicate that incidents of targeted violence in school were rarely impulsive; that the students who perpetrated these attacks usually planned out the attack in advance – with planning behavior that was oftentimes observable; and that, prior to most attacks, other children knew that the attack was to occur. Taken together, these findings suggest that it may be possible to prevent some future school attacks from occurring – and that efforts to identify, assess, and manage students who may have the intent and capacity to launch an attack may be a promising strategy for prevention.

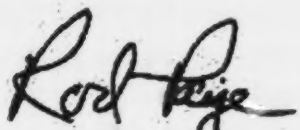
This document, *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*, takes these find

ings one step further by setting forth a process for identifying, assessing, and managing students who may pose a threat of targeted violence in schools. This process – known as threat assessment – was first pioneered by the U.S. Secret Service as a mechanism for investigating threats against the President of the United States and other protected officials. The Secret Service threat assessment approach was developed based upon findings from an earlier Secret Service study on assassinations and attacks of public officials and public figures.

This *Guide* represents a modification of the Secret Service threat assessment process, based upon findings from the *Safe School Initiative*. It is intended for use by school personnel, law enforcement officials, and others with protective responsibilities in our nation's schools. This *Guide* includes suggestions for developing a threat assessment team within a school or school district, steps to take when a threat or other information of concern comes to light, consideration about when to involve law enforcement personnel, issues of information sharing, and ideas for creating safe school climates.

We applaud all of you working to keep children safe in school. We hope that the information in this *Guide*, and the companion *Final Report*, assist you in your continued efforts to do so.

Roderick Paige



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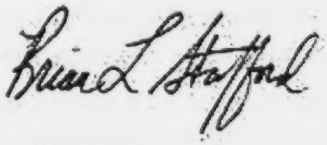

Director
United States Secret Service
May 2002

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This *Guide* would not have been possible without the support and assistance that the authors received from several key officials and personnel at the Department of Education and the Secret Service. Absent the significant contributions of these individuals, the Secret Service's experience in researching and preventing targeted violence could not have been translated into a useful guide about threat assessment and targeted school violence. At the Department of Education, these individuals are: Secretary of Education Rod Paige, Assistant Secretary for Office of Secondary and Elementary Education Susan B. Neuman, and Connie Deshpande. Secret Service officials who provided guidance and support for this project include: Director Brian Stafford, Special Agent in Charge George Luczko, Assistant Special Agent in Charge Matt Doherty, Assistant to the Special Agent in Charge Cindy Rubendall, and Resident Agent in Charge John Berglund.

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Robert Fein
Bryan Vossekuil
William Pollack
Randy Borum
William Modzeleski
Marisa Reddy
Washington, D.C.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THREAT ASSESSMENT AND THE PREVENTION OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE

The vast majority of the nation's students will complete their schooling without ever being touched by peer violence. Nevertheless, recent school attacks carried out by students have shaken the image of schools as reliably safe and secure environments in which the qualifications of teachers and the efficacy of the educational curricula—are the most pressing concerns of educators and parents. Televised images of frightened and injured students fleeing school grounds have imprinted themselves on the American consciousness. "Columbine," the Littleton, Colorado high school that on April 20, 1999, was the scene of the most violent of the school attacks recorded to date in the United States, has entered contemporary vocabulary as a national symbol of the violence that claimed the lives of 14 students and a teacher on that day.

Incidents of targeted school violence[1] occurred in 37 communities across the country between 1974 and June 2000. Compared to the other types of violence and crime children face both in and outside of school, school-based attacks are rare. While the Department of Education reports that 60 million children attend the nation's 100,000 schools, available statistics indicate that few of these students will fall prey to serious violence in school settings.[2]

However, highly publicized school shootings have created uncertainty about the safety and security of this country's schools and generated fear that an attack might

[1] Targeted violence is defined as any incident of violence where a known or knowable attacker selects a particular target prior to their violent attack. See Fein, R.A., Vossekuil, B. & Holden, G. "Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence." *Research in Action.* U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice: Washington, D.C. (September, 1995), at 1-7. NCJ 155000

occur in any school, in any community. Increased national attention to the problem of school violence has prompted educators, law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, and parents to press for answers to two central questions: "Could we have known that these attacks were being planned?" and, if so, "What could we have done to prevent these attacks from occurring?"

For example, what should happen when a student comes to attention for saying something or behaving in a manner that causes concern, as in the following instances?

"The kids are saying that Johnny told his friends not to go to the cafeteria at noon on Tuesday because something big and bad is going to happen."

Marty, who has appeared withdrawn and irritable the past few weeks, handed in a story about a student putting a bomb in an empty school.

Sandy brought bullets to school to show friends.

Rafael, who got pushed around again after gym class, stormed out in tears, shouting "You're all going to pay!"

Casey, who was suspended last year for bringing a knife to school, left a "hit list" on his desk.

Terry submitted an essay in which an assassin blew up the school, attacked the governor, and then killed himself.

Given the enormous concern about targeted school violence, these reported statements and behaviors cannot be ignored. But how should school officials and other responsible adults respond?

This publication, *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*, is the product of an on-

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[2] U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice (1999). 1999 Annual Report on School Safety. Washington, DC: Authors

going collaboration between the U. S. Secret Service and the U. S. Department of Education to begin to answer these questions. Its focus is on the use of the threat assessment process pioneered by the Secret Service as one component of the Department of Education's efforts to help schools across the nation reduce school violence and create safe climates. As developed by the Secret Service, threat assessment involves efforts to identify, assess, and manage individuals and groups who may pose threats of targeted violence.

Development of the School Threat Assessment Process

This *Guide* is an outgrowth of the joint Secret Service/Department of Education Safe School Initiative. This initiative, begun in June 1999, was undertaken to explore the potential for adapting the threat assessment investigative process developed by the Secret Service to the problem of targeted school violence.

The Safe School Initiative, implemented through the Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center and the Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, combined the Department of Education's expertise in helping schools facilitate learning through the creation of safe environments for students, faculty, and staff, and the Secret Service's experience in studying and preventing targeted violence.

The Safe School Initiative began with a study of the thinking, planning, and other pre-attack behaviors engaged in by students who carried out school shootings.[3] That study examined 37 incidents of targeted school violence that occurred in the United States from December 1974 through May 2000 when researchers concluded their data collection.

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[3] Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., Reddy, M., Borum, R., & Modzeleski, W. *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States.* U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education: Washington, D. C. (May 2002), at 15. [hereinafter *The Safe School Initiative Final Report*]. For a fuller discussion of the Safe School Initiative, its methodology, and findings, please refer to this report.

The Safe School Initiative was patterned after the Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP), the Secret Service's earlier five-year study of the thinking and behavior of individuals who carried out or attempted lethal attacks on public officials or prominent individuals in the United States since 1949.[4] The purpose of the ECSP was to generate a better understanding of attacks against public officials that, in turn, would inform Secret Service agents' investigations of threats against the president and other Secret Service protectees, and the development of strategies to prevent harm to these public officials.

In July 1998, the Secret Service and the Justice Department's National Institute of Justice released the publication, *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials,* in an effort to make the Service's threat assessment protocols available to a wider law enforcement audience. That publication offers state and local police officials guidance in carrying out and evaluating the findings of threat assessment investigations.[5]

The Safe School Initiative study reinforced the findings of the Secret Service's ECSP study concerning the thinking and behavior of attackers. In particular, like the ECSP, the Safe School Initiative concluded that most attackers did not threaten their targets directly, but did engage in pre-attack behaviors that would have indicated an inclination toward or the potential for targeted violence had they been identified. Findings about the pre-attack behaviors of perpetrators of targeted violence validated the "fact-based" approach of the threat assessment process. This process relies primarily on an appraisal of *behaviors*, rather than on *stated threats* or *traits*, as the basis for determining whether there is cause for concern. These findings argue favorably for

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[4] Fein, R. & Vossekuil, B. "Assassination in the United States: An Operational Study of Recent Assassins, Attackers, and Near-Lethal Approachers." *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 44 (1999), at 321-333.

[5] Fein, R. & Vossekuil, B. *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials*. U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice: Washington, D. C. (July 1998).

pursuing adaptation of this threat assessment process for use by school administrators and law enforcement officials in responding to the problem of targeted school violence.

The *Guide* is intended to provide school administrators and law enforcement officials guidance in incorporating the threat assessment process for investigating, evaluating, and managing targeted violence into strategies to prevent school violence. The purpose of the *Guide* is to contribute to achieving the broader goal of creating safe and secure school environments by helping school and law enforcement officials respond responsibly, prudently, and effectively to threats and other behaviors that raise concern about potential violence.

Effective threat assessment can only occur in a larger context of school safety. Cultures and climates of safety, respect, and emotional support can help diminish the possibility of targeted violence in schools. Environments in which students, teachers and administrators pay attention to students' social and emotional needs–as well as their academic needs–will have fewer situations that require formal threat assessments.

In an educational setting where there is a climate of safety, adults and students respect each other. This climate is defined and fostered by students having a positive connection to at least one adult in authority. In such a climate, students develop the capacity to talk and openly share their concerns without fear of shame and reprisal. They try to help friends and fellow students who are in distress, bringing serious concerns to the attention of adults.

Ideally when this climate of safety is created, students experience a sense of emotional "fit" and of respect. Problems are raised and addressed before they become serious. As a result, the potential for school violence diminishes. When a member of the school community shows personal pain that might lead them to harm themselves or others, someone is available. Young people can find an adult to trust with this information, so that it does not remain "secret" until it is too late.

A young man who brought a rifle into school, killing two students, and wounding several others, told us from his prison cell: "I was really hurting. I didn't have anybody to talk to. They just didn't care."

Organization of the *Guide*

The remainder of this *Guide* is organized into seven chapters. Chapter II of the *Guide* discusses characteristics of safe school climates. Chapter III presents the key findings of the Safe School Initiative and discusses the implications of these findings for the prevention of targeted school violence. Chapter IV describes the principles underlying the threat assessment approach to preventing targeted violence, and outlines the central elements of a threat assessment process.

Chapters V and VI will be of particular interest to school administrators, law enforcement officials, and others who wish to pursue the development of a threat assessment process as a component of a broader school violence prevention strategy. Chapter V outlines the approach to identifying students whose behavior may suggest the potential for targeted school violence, and discusses the steps in carrying out a threat assessment inquiry or investigation.[6] Chapter VI addresses the issue of managing threatening situations.

Chapter VII presents an action plan for creating safe school cultures and climates and an action plan to help school leaders implement a threat assessment program. In the final chapter of the *Guide*, Chapter VIII, the authors reassert the importance of the threat assessment process as a component of broader school safety and violence prevention strategies. In addition, the authors offer some concluding observations on the efficacy of

[6] This *Guide* distinguishes between a threat assessment *inquiry* and a threat assessment *investigation*. Threat assessment inquiries are initiated, conducted, and controlled by school officials (often with input or participation from law enforcement professionals), while threat assessment investigations are initiated, conducted, and controlled by law enforcement officials. Each school system or community should decide where to place the line between an "inquiry" and an "investigation." For further discussion, please see Chapter V.

the threat assessment process as a tool that can help school administrators, law enforcement officials, and others to make critical decisions about responding to situations involving the threat of targeted school violence.

Readers will find additional resources to inform the development and implementation of school threat assessment processes in the appendix that is included at the end of the *Guide*. The Appendix provides an annotated list of publications and other resources on threat assessment and related topics.

CHAPTER II

CREATING CLIMATES OF SCHOOL SAFETY:

A FOUNDATION FOR REDUCING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

"What I hate about this school is that I'm being picked on in the halls and just about everywhere else"–A 14-year-old student

"School has always been hard for me, literally from the first day I started elementary school. People saw me as a … good target. They just started picking on me for no reason…they made fun of me [and, now] I'm going through self-esteem issues because of the 11 years I was a target."–An 18-year-old student.

"They want me to open up, express myself. Quite a funny notion, ironic! If someone had helped me do that several years ago, I probably would have turned out okay."–Comment in a diary by a 17-year-old student who attacked others at school, then killed himself.

The threat assessment process described in this *Guide* is presented as an approach to addressing the problem of targeted school violence. Incidents of targeted school violence are extreme and, thankfully, rare events. However, targeted school violence is arguably only the tip of the iceberg of pain, loneliness, desperation, and despair that many students in this nation's schools deal with on a daily basis.

Threat assessment should be looked upon as one component in an overall strategy to reduce school violence. The threat assessment process by itself is unlikely to have a lasting effect on the problem of targeted school violence unless that process is implemented in the larger context of strategies to ensure that schools offer their students safe and secure learning environments. The principle objective of school violence-reduction strategies should be to create cultures and climates of safety, respect, and emotional support within educational institutions.

Fostering a Culture of Respect

In educational settings that support climates of safety, adults and students respect each other. A safe school environment offers positive personal role models in its faculty. It provides a place for open discussion where diversity and differences are respected; communication between adults and students is encouraged and supported; and conflict is managed and mediated constructively.

Cultures and climates of safety support environments in which teachers and administrators pay attention to students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic needs. Such environments emphasize "emotional intelligence," as well as educational or intellectual pursuits.[7] Students experience a sense of emotional "fit" and of respect within the school body, and may be less likely to engage in or be victimized by harmful behavior.[8]

A culture of safety creates "shame free zones" in which daily teasing and bullying is not accepted as a normal part of the adolescent culture.[9] School environments characterized by bullying and meanness can lead to student isolation and fear. At best, school environments that turn a blind eye to bullying and teasing inhibit the work of school–learning and growth. At the worst, such environments allow behavior that fosters fear and fury that stunts the healthy development of the victims of that behavior, and may lead to psychological and physical violence.

Creating Connections Between Adults and Students

Connection through human relationships is a central component of a culture of safety and respect. This connection is the critical emotional glue among students, and

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[7] Goleman, D. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books, (1995).
[8] See, for example, Resnick,M.D., Bearman,P.S., Blum, R.W. et. al., (1997) "Protecting Adolescents from Harm," JAMA, 278(10) pp. 823-832. See also www.allaboutkids.umn.edu.
[9] See Pollack, W. *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. New York: Henry Holt, Inc., (1998).; Pollack, W., & Shuster, T. *Real Boys' Voices*. New York: Random House, (2000).; Pollack, W., & Cushman, K.*Real Boys Workbook*. New York: Villard, (2001).

between students and adults charged with meeting students' educational, social, emotional, and safety needs[10].

In a climate of safety, students have a positive connection to at least one adult in authority. Each student feels that there is an adult to whom he or she can turn for support and advice if things get tough, and with whom that student can share his or her concerns openly and without fear of shame or reprisal. Schools in which students feel able to talk to teachers, deans, secretaries, coaches, custodians, counselors, nurses, school safety officers, bus drivers, principals, and other staff support communication between students and adults about concerns and problems.

Schools that emphasize personal contact and connection between school officials and students will take steps to identify and work with students who have few perceptible connections to the school. For example, during staff meetings in a school in a California School District, the names of students are posted, and school faculty members are asked to put stars next to the names of those students with whom they have the closest relationships. Faculty members then focus on establishing relationships with those students with few stars next to their names.

Breaking the "Code of Silence"

In many schools there is a pervasive sense among students and some adults that telling grownups that another student is in pain or may pose a threat violates an unwritten, but powerful, "code of silence." A code of silence has the potentially damaging effect of forcing students to handle their pain and problems on their own, without the benefit of adult support. These codes also suggest that a student should not bring any concerns that he or she may have about a peer's behavior to the attention of responsible adults.

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[10] Pollack, W. *Real Boys.* (1998). See note #9.

The findings of the Safe School Initiative suggest that silence is far from golden. In fact, study findings indicate that silence may be downright dangerous. The study found that most school shooters shared their potentially lethal plans with other students, but that students who knew of planned attacks rarely told adults.

In a climate of safety, students are willing to break the code of silence. Students are more likely to turn to trusted adults for help in resolving problems. Moreover, students are more willing to share their concerns about the problem behavior of peers with their teachers and other adults in positions of authority within the school without feeling that they are "snitching" or "ratting" on a buddy or friend.

As a result of responsible bystander behavior, serious problems come to adult attention earlier, before these problems lead to violence. Problems are raised and addressed before they become serious, and the potential for school violence arguably is diminished. In an environment that encourages communication between students and adults, information does not remain "secret" until it is too late. In fact, it is considered good citizenship or even heroic to go to a teacher to share the fact that a fellow student is in trouble and may be contemplating a dangerous act.

Major Components and Tasks for Creating a Safe/Connected School Climate

The major components and tasks for creating a safe school climate include:

- Assessment of the school's emotional climate;
- Emphasis on the importance of listening in schools;
- Adoption of a strong, but caring stance against the code of silence;
- Prevention of, and intervention in, bullying;
- Involvement of all members of the school community in planning, creating, and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect;
- Development of trusting relationships between each student and at least one adult at school; and

- Creation of mechanisms for developing and sustaining safe school climates.

Discussion of these components and tasks may be found in Chapter VII of this *Guide*.

CHAPTER III

KEY FINDINGS OF THE SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE'S STUDY OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE

This chapter summarizes the Safe School Initiative and the findings that support a threat assessment process to identify, assess, and manage threatening situations in schools. The Safe School Initiative examined incidents of targeted school violence from the time of the incident backward, to identify the attackers' pre-incident behaviors and communications and to explore whether such information might aid in preventing future attacks.

The findings of the Safe School Initiative suggest that there are productive actions that educators, law enforcement officials, and others can pursue in response to the problem of targeted school violence. Specifically, Initiative findings suggest that these officials may wish to consider focusing their efforts to formulate strategies for preventing these attacks in two principal areas:

- developing the capacity to pick up on and evaluate available or knowable information that might indicate that there is a risk of a targeted school attack; and,
- employing the results of these risk evaluations, or "threat assessments," in developing strategies to prevent potential school attacks from occurring.

Support for these suggestions is found in the 10 key findings of the Safe School Initiative study:

- Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.

- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engage in targeted school violence.
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers were known to have difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide.
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

An overview of these findings, and their implications for the use of threat assessment protocols to identify, assess, and manage possible targeted school violence, follows.

Implications of Key Findings for the Use of Threat Assessment Protocols

Key Finding 1

Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely are sudden, impulsive acts.

Explanation

Students who engaged in school-based attacks typically did not "just snap" and engage in impulsive or random acts of targeted school violence. Instead, the attacks examined under the Safe School Initiative appeared to be the end result of a comprehensible process of thinking and behavior–behavior that typically begins with an idea, progresses to the development of a plan, moves on to securing the means to carry out the plan, and culminates in an attack.

> Example: One attacker asked his friends to help him get ammunition for one of his weapons; sawed off the end of a rifle to make it easier to conceal beneath his clothes; shopped for a long trench coat with his mother; and cut the pockets out of the coat so that he could conceal the weapon within the coat while holding it through one of the cut-out pockets. This same attacker had a well-known fascination with weapons and frequently told his friends that he thought about killing certain students at school.

Implications

The process of thinking and planning that leads up to an attack potentially may be knowable or discernible from the attacker's behaviors and communications. To the extent that information about an attacker's intent and planning is knowable and may be uncovered before an incident, some attacks may be preventable. However, the Safe School Initiative found that the time span between the attacker's decision to mount an attack and the actual incident may be short. Consequently, when indications that a student may pose a threat to the school community arise in the form of information about a possible planned attack, school administrators and law enforcement officials will need to move quickly to inquire about and intervene in that possible plan.

Key Finding 2

Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.

Explanation

In most cases, other young persons–friends, schoolmates, and/or siblings–knew about the attacker's idea or plan for a possible attack on the school before that attack occurred. However, this information rarely made its way to an adult.

Example: One attacker had planned to shoot students in the lobby of his school prior to the beginning of classes. He told two friends exactly what he had planned and asked three other students to meet him in the mezzanine overlooking the school lobby the morning of the planned attack, ostensibly so that these students would be out of harm's way. On most mornings, few students would congregate in the mezzanine before the school day began. However, on the morning of the attack, word about what was going to happen spread to such an extent that, by the time the attacker opened fire in his school lobby, 24 students had gathered in the mezzanine waiting for the attack to begin. One student who knew about the attacker's plans brought a camera so that he could take pictures of the event.

Implications

First and foremost, this finding suggests that students can be an important part of prevention efforts. A friend or schoolmate may be the first person to hear that a student is thinking about or planning to harm someone. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, those who have information about a potential incident of targeted school violence may not alert an adult on their own. Schools can encourage students to report this information in part by identifying and breaking down barriers in the school environment that inadvertently may discourage students from coming forward with this information. Schools also may benefit from ensuring that they have a fair, thoughtful, and effective system to respond to whatever information students do bring forward. If students have

concerns about how adults will react to information that they bring forward, they may be even less inclined to volunteer such information.

In addition, this finding highlights the importance in a threat assessment inquiry of attempts to gather all relevant information from anyone who may have contact with the student. Efforts to gather all potentially relevant pieces of information, however innocuous they may appear on their own, from all individuals with whom the student has contact may help to develop a more comprehensive picture of the student's ideas, activities, and plans. In the end, investigators likely will find that different people in the student's life may have different pieces of the puzzle.

Key Finding 3

Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.

Explanation

The Safe School Initiative found that most attackers in fact did not threaten their target directly and some made no threat at all. Instead, other behaviors and communications that may prompt concern, such as hearing that a young person is talking about bringing a gun to school, are indicators of a possible threat and therefore should prompt the initiation of efforts to gather information.

Implications

This finding underscores the importance of *not waiting* for a threat before beginning an inquiry. School administrators, of course, should respond to all students who make threats because the lack of response could be taken by the threatener as permission to proceed with carrying out the threat. In the end, however, it is important to distinguish between someone who *makes* a threat–tells people they intend to harm someone–and someone who *poses* a threat–engages in behaviors that indicate an intent, planning, or preparation for an attack. Those conducting threat assessment inquiries

should focus particular attention on any information that indicates that a student *poses* a threat, regardless of whether the student has told a potential target he or she intends to do them harm.

Key Finding 4

There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engage in targeted school violence.

Explanation

The demographic, personality, school history, and social characteristics of the attackers varied substantially. Moreover, knowing that an individual shares characteristics, behaviors, features, or traits with prior school shooters does not help in determining whether a particular student is thinking about or planning for a violent act.

Example: In one case, the dean of students had commended a student for improving his grades and behavior a few weeks before that student carried out an attack at his school.

Implications

The use of profiles to determine whether a student is thinking about or planning a violent attack is not an effective approach to identifying students who may pose a risk for targeted violence at school or–once a student has been identified–for assessing the risk that a particular student may pose a risk for targeted school violence. Reliance on profiles to predict future school attacks carries two substantial risks: (i) the great majority of students who fit any given profile of a "school shooter" actually will not pose a risk of targeted violence; and, (ii) using profiles will fail to identify some students who in fact pose a risk of violence, but share few if any characteristics with prior attackers.

Rather than trying to determine the "type" of student who may engage in targeted school violence, an inquiry should focus instead on a student's *behaviors and communications* to determine if that student appears to be planning or preparing for an attack. Rather than asking whether a particular student "looks like" those who have launched school-based attacks before, it is more productive to ask whether the student is on a path toward a violent attack, if so how fast the student is moving toward attack, and where intervention may be possible.

Key Finding 5

Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

Explanation

Several key findings point to the fact that young people send signals–both direct and indirect–to others regarding their problems. The boys and young men who engaged in the targeted school violence examined by the Safe School Initiative were not "invisible" students. In fact, nearly all of these students engaged in behaviors that caused concern to at least one person, usually an adult–and most concerned at least three people.

Implications

This finding highlights the range of behaviors in a student's life that may be noticeable to adults and that could prompt some additional probing by a caring adult. As was true in some of the incidents covered in the Safe School Initiative's study, individuals in contact with the attacker each may have observed something of concern about that student's behavior, but not of sufficient concern for them to notify anyone in a position to respond.

Educators and other adults can learn how to pick up on these signals and make appropriate referrals. By inquiring about any information that may have prompted some concern, an investigator may be able to develop a more comprehensive picture of the

student's past and current behavior, and identify any indications that the student is intent on or planning to attack. However, discretion should be exercised in determining whom to talk to about the student, so as not to alienate or stigmatize the student of concern.

Key Finding 6

Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide.

Explanation

Many students, not just those who engaged in school-based attacks, experience or perceive major losses in their lives. Most students who face a significant loss, or who have difficulty coping with such a loss, are not going to be at risk for a school-based attack. However, information that indicates a student is facing or having trouble dealing with a significantly difficult situation may indicate a need to refer the student to appropriate services and resources.

In addition, more than three-quarters of school shooters had a history of suicidal thoughts, threats, gestures, or attempts. Most of these students were known to have been severely depressed or desperate at some point before their attacks.

Example: One school shooter submitted a series of poems describing his thoughts of suicide and homicide to his English teacher. One poem read:

Am I insane
To want to end this pain
To want to end my life
By using a sharp knife
Am I insane
Thinking life is profane
Knowing life is useless
Cause my emotions are a mess
Am I insane

Thinking I've nothing to gain
Considering suicide
Cause love ha[illegible] died
Am I insane
Wanting to spill blood like rain
Sending them all to Hell
From humanity I've fell

The teacher became concerned and recommended that the student receive help. Help, however, was not offered. After failing to kill himself, this student killed two adults at school. He hoped to be convicted of capital murder and executed by the state.

Implications

In cases where there is concern about the possibility that a student may engage in targeted violence, an inquiry or investigation should include attention to any indication that a student is having difficulty coping with major losses or perceived failures, particularly where these losses or failures appear to have prompted feelings of desperation and hopelessness. An inquiry or investigation also should anticipate changes in the life of a troubled student, and consider whether these changes might increase–or decrease–the threat that the student poses.

Key Finding 7

Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.

Explanation

Bullying was not a factor in every case, and clearly not every child who is bullied in school will pose a risk for targeted violence in school. Nevertheless, in a number of the incidents of targeted school violence studied, attackers described being bullied in terms that suggested that these experiences approached torment. These attackers told of

behaviors that, if they occurred in the workplace, likely would meet legal definitions of harassment and/or assault.

> Example: In one situation, most of the attacker's schoolmates described the attacker as "the kid everyone teased." In witness statements from that incident, schoolmates described how virtually every child in the school had at some point thrown the attacker against a locker; tripped him in the hall; held his head under water in the pool; or thrown things at him. Several schoolmates had noted that the attacker acted differently in the days preceding the attack in that he seemed more annoyed by and less tolerant of the teasing than usual.

Implications

The prevalence of bullying found by the Safe School Initiative's examination of targeted school violence and in other recent studies should strongly support ongoing efforts to reduce bullying in American schools. Educators can play an important role in ensuring that students are not bullied in schools and that schools not only do not permit bullying, but also empower other students to let adults in the school know if students are being bullied.

Key Finding 8

Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.

Explanation

Almost two-thirds of attackers used a handgun in their attack. Almost half used a rifle. Most attackers acquired weapons from their home or the home of a relative. Approximately two-thirds of attackers had a history of using guns prior to the attack.

Implications

Access to weapons among some students may be common. However, when the idea of an attack exists, *any* effort to acquire, prepare, or use a weapon or ammunition,

including bomb-making components, may be a significant move in the attacker's progression from idea to action. Any inquiry should include investigation of and attention to weapons access and use and to communications about weapons.

The large proportion of attackers who acquired their guns from home points to the need for schools and law enforcement officials to collaborate on policies and procedures for responding when a student is thought to have a firearm in school. In particular, schools should be aware of the provisions of the Federal Gun-Free Schools Act, which generally requires a minimum one-year expulsion of students who bring a gun to school and that all violations be reported to local law enforcement officials.

Key Finding 9

In many cases, other students were involved in the attack in some capacity.

Explanation

The Safe School Initiative found that in over half of the incidents, others assisted in the planning or execution of the attack by actively encouraging the attacker to shoot others at school, or even helping to select targets and train the shooter in how to use a weapon.

> Example: One attacker's original idea had been to bring a gun to school and let other students see him with it. He wanted to look tough, so that the students who had been harassing him would leave him alone. When the attacker shared this idea with two friends, however, they convinced him that he could not just show up with a gun, but actually had to *shoot at* people at the school in order to get the other students to leave him alone. It was after this conversation that he decided to mount his school attack.

Implications

This finding highlights the importance of considering what prompting or encouragement a student may receive from others in his life that influences any intent, planning, or preparations for a potential attack. Any inquiry or investigation of potential targeted school violence should include attention to the role that a student's friends or peers may be playing in that student's thinking about and preparations for an attack. It is possible that feedback from friends or others may help to move a student from an unformed thought about attacking to developing and advancing a plan to carry out the attack.

This finding speaks to the importance of school officials paying attention to the "settings" and climates of their schools. Peers exert enormous influence over their friends and schoolmates. And principals, teachers, counselors, coaches, and other adults at school may make all the difference in preventing violence. An environment in which it is clear that violence doesn't solve problems, but only makes them worse may help prevent tragedy. A climate in which a young person is seen as a "snitch" or a "rat" for telling an adult about a student in distress differs from one in which young people know that they can call on adults to help students who are in pain.

Key Finding 10

Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention and most were brief in duration.

Explanation

Law enforcement authorities responded quickly to almost all calls from schools about attacks. However, most attacks were resolved within minutes, without law enforcement intervention.

Implications

The short duration of most incidents of targeted school violence argues for the importance of developing preventive measures in addition to any emergency planning for

a school or school district. The preventive measures should include protocols and procedures for responding to and managing threats and other behaviors of concern.

In summary, the findings of the Safe School Initiative suggest that some future school attacks may be preventable. The fact that most attackers engaged in pre-incident planning behavior and shared their intentions and plans with others, suggests that those conducting threat assessment inquiries or investigations could uncover these types of information. The remainder of this *Guide* sets forth how to develop a capacity for and conduct a threat assessment process.

CHAPTER IV

IMPLEMENTING A SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The primary purpose of a threat assessment is to prevent targeted violence. The threat assessment process is centered upon on analysis of the facts and evidence of behavior in a given situation. The appraisal of risk in a threat assessment focuses on actions, communications, and specific circumstances that might suggest that an individual intends to mount an attack and is engaged in planning or preparing for that event.

In a situation that becomes the focus of a threat assessment inquiry or investigation, appropriate authorities gather information, evaluate facts, and make a determination as to whether a given student *poses* a threat of violence to a target. If an inquiry indicates that there is a risk of violence in a specific situation, authorities conducting the threat assessment collaborate with others to develop and implement a plan to manage or reduce the threat posed by the student in that situation.

Six principles form the foundation of the threat assessment process. These principles are:

- Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and oftentimes discernible, process of thinking and behavior.
- Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.
- An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.
- Effective threat assessment is based upon facts, rather than on characteristics or "traits."

- An "integrated systems approach" should guide threat assessment inquiries and investigations.
- The central question in a threat assessment inquiry or investigation is whether a student *poses* a threat, not whether the student has *made* a threat.

In addition, three elements guide the development and operation of an effective school threat assessment program. These elements are:

- authority to conduct an assessment;
- capacity to conduct inquiries and investigations; and,
- systems relationships.

These principles and elements are discussed below.

Principles of the Threat Assessment Process

This *Guide* is about the systematic use of threat assessment as a central component in preventing targeted school violence. The threat assessment process involves identifying, assessing, and managing individuals who might pose a risk of violence to an identified or identifiable target. Implementation of a threat assessment process is informed by six underlying principles.

Principle 1: Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and oftentimes discernible, process of thinking and behavior.

Findings of the Safe School Initiative indicate that students and former students who committed targeted attacks at schools almost always thought about their attacks in advance, and did not just "snap" suddenly. These findings suggest that students who carry out school attacks may consider possible targets; talk with others about their ideas and intentions; and record their thinking in diaries and journals or on a Web site. They may seek out weapons to use in the attack, and they may practice with these weapons in

preparation for the attack. The actions of these attackers may be deliberate and occur over days and weeks, months or years.

Principle 2: Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the person, the situation, the setting, and the target.

Understanding and preventing acts of targeted violence require a focus on these four component parts and their interaction: the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.

- *The potential attacker*: To determine the risk of targeted violence, a threat assessor must gather information about the potential attacker. In a threat assessment inquiry or investigation, a major question is: How has this student dealt with situations that have led him or her to see life as unbearably stressful? Individuals who in times of great stress have considered or acted upon ideas of suicide or violence toward others, or both, should be considered persons of increased concern.

- *The situation*: Investigators should examine circumstances and significant events in the life of the individual, especially recent events that have been overwhelmingly stressful. For students who engaged in school-based attacks, those events included having been bullied and humiliated, especially in public; loss of significant relationships; and perceived failures or loss of status. Almost all school shooters experienced some major situational stress at some point before their attack.[11]

- *The setting*: The third factor to consider is the specific setting at the time that the student came to authorities' attention as possibly posing a threat of targeted school violence. Do fellow students, friends, or others say–directly

[11] It should be emphasized again that many young people experience losses, failures, humiliations, and other kinds of situational stressors, and that few become school shooters.

or indirectly–that violence is not a solution to problems? Do these people suggest ways to get help and assistance? In a school, are there respectful connections among students and adults, networks of trusting relationships, that facilitate non-violent problem-solving? Or is the idea of violence proposed, supported, accepted, or ignored by those who know the potential attacker?

In many school shootings, other young persons knew about the shooter's interest in mounting an attack. In some cases, clear warnings were dismissed or ignored. In others, friends and fellow students of the shooter encouraged or helped the attacker in his pursuit of violence. Messages about the acceptability of violence that are communicated directly or subtly to a potential attacker by students and/or adults in his or her environment may facilitate, or alternatively help to prevent, an attack.

- *The target.* When assessing the risk of an attack at school, investigators and others with protective responsibilities also must pay attention to the individual's choice of a potential target. The attacker may target a particular individual or group of individuals over some perceived injury or loss. In some cases, attackers chose a specific target, such as a particular student or teacher. In other instances, the target was more general: The school, "jocks," or "kids in the cafeteria."

Principle 3: An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.

An investigative mindset is central to successful application of the threat assessment process. Threat assessment requires thoughtful probing; viewing information with healthy skepticism; and paying attention to key points about pre-attack behaviors. Authorities who carry out threat assessments must strive to be both accurate and fair.

Moreover, threat assessors should question the information in front of them continuously. Ideally, there should be credible verification of all essential "facts." Information about a potential attacker's interests, statements, and actions should be corroborated, wherever possible.

The investigative mindset and perspective also rely on common sense. Threat assessors working to understand a given situation should step back periodically from the individual details of an inquiry or investigation and ask whether information gathered makes sense and supports any hypothesis developed concerning the risk posed by the subject of the threat assessment inquiry.

Principle 4: Effective threat assessment is based on facts, rather than characteristics or "traits."

A major principle of threat assessment is that each investigation stands on its own. Inferences and conclusions about risk should be guided by an analysis of facts and behaviors specific to the person of concern and the given situation. Any student with the motive, intent, and ability potentially is capable of mounting a targeted attack at school. Judgments about a student's risk of violence should be based upon analysis of behaviorally relevant facts, not on "traits" or "characteristics" of a given individual or of a class of individuals.

In the climate of fear that followed recent attacks, students in high schools across the country who appeared angry and wore trench coats were marked as possible school attackers. They were so labeled because of appearance and demeanor. Blanket characterizations, or student "profiles," do not provide a reliable basis for making judgments of the threat posed by a particular student.[12] Even worse, the use of profiles

[12] Please refer to Reddy, et. al. (2001), "Evaluating Risk for Targeted Violence in Schools: Comparing Risk Assessment, Threat Assessment, and Other Approaches," for a discussion of the use and limitations of profiling as a tool for assessing the risk of targeted school violence. The full citation for the article is provided in the **Appendix, Annotated Resources**, of this *Guide*.

can shift attention away from more reliable facts and evidence about a student's behavior and communications.

Principle 5: An "integrated systems approach" should guide threat assessment investigations.

In a threat assessment, bits of information might be viewed as pieces of a puzzle. Each bit may appear inconsequential or only slightly worrisome by itself. But, when the pieces are put together–as oftentimes has occurred in "after the fact" analyses of school attacks–the behaviors and communications of a student may coalesce into a discernible pattern that indicates a threat of violence. In many school attacks, information existed within the school and community that might have alerted authorities to the risk of attack posed by a particular student.

Relationships with agencies and service systems within the school and the surrounding community are critical to identifying, assessing, and managing students who are on a path toward carrying out a school attack. An integrated systems approach recognizes the necessity of cooperation and partnerships between schools and systems outside of the school. These may include law enforcement, social services and mental health providers, the courts, community agencies, families, worksites, religious organizations, and others.

Principle 6: The central question of a threat assessment is whether a student *poses* a threat, not whether the student *made* a threat.

Although some individuals who threaten harm may pose a real threat of targeted violence, many do not. The Safe School Initiative found that fewer than 20 percent of school shooters communicated a direct or conditional threat to their target before the attack. By contrast, individuals who are found to *pose* threats of violence frequently *do not make* threats to their targets. The study found that in more than 80 percent of the cases, school shooters did not threaten their targets directly, but they did communicate their intent and/or plans to others before the attack.

These findings underscore the importance of making judgments in threat assessment investigations based upon a student's behaviors and communications, rather than upon whether or not that student threatened his or her target. Authorities conducting threat assessment investigations must distinguish between *making* a threat, e.g., telling a potential target that he or she may or will be harmed, and *posing* a threat, e.g., engaging in behavior that indicates furthering a plan or building capacity for a violent act.

Nevertheless, threats of violence should not be dismissed out of hand. Students may make threats with a variety of intents and for a wide range of reasons, e.g., to get attention; to express anger or frustration; to frighten or coerce their peers; as a part of joking or "playing around;" or, in some cases, to communicate intent to attack.

Consequently, every threat should receive prompt attention. Although voicing a threat should not be used as the principle determinant in making judgments about the likelihood of a school attack, it likewise would be a mistake to assume that individuals who make threats in every instance are unlikely to follow through on those communications.

Elements of a School Threat Assessment Process

Authorities involved in carrying out a threat assessment inquiry or investigation should gather and analyze information about the behavior and communications of the student of concern. This information, in turn, will permit these authorities to make reasonable judgments about whether the student of concern is moving along a path toward an attack on an identifiable target. Three elements are essential to the development and operation of an effective school safety threat assessment program.[13]

1. Authority to Conduct an Investigation

[13] See **Chapter VII, Action Plans for School Leaders**, for further guidance in creating school threat assessment programs.

A teacher comes to the principal's office to report "the kids are saying that Johnny told his friends not to go to the cafeteria at noon on Tuesday because something big and bad is going to happen." What did Johnny mean by that statement? Is Johnny planning to attack the school? Perhaps Johnny is engaging in idle talk. Perhaps the report of Johnny's statement is inaccurate. Perhaps Johnny is planning an attack on the school or has knowledge about other students' plans.

Clearly, this information cannot be ignored. How, then, should the principal respond to this report? Should the principal call Johnny to the office and ask him about the report? Should other students be queried about the report? What if Johnny denies making the statement that has been reported, while other students assert otherwise?

Schools should have in place clear policies on collecting and reacting to information on potentially threatening situations and determining whether this information merits further attention through a threat assessment inquiry and investigation. Threat assessment inquiry and investigation should be initiated if there is credible information that passes a critical threshold of concern.

In creating these policies, school administrators should be aware of and consult with the school's legal counsel about legal issues related to the conduct of a threat assessment inquiry or investigation. These legal issues include the effects of laws pertaining to: (1) access to and sharing of information, and (2) searches of a student's person or property. Each of these issues should be discussed with the school's legal counsel.

Establishing Authority to Conduct an Inquiry or Investigation

A formal policy authorizing school officials to conduct a threat assessment should cover the following topics:

- the purpose and scope of the policy;

- the role of educators and the threat assessment team vis a vis the role of law enforcement;
- the identity of, and delegation of authority to, school officials concerning determination that a threat assessment inquiry or investigation should be pursued;
- the definition of the threshold of concern for initiating a threat assessment inquiry or investigation, i.e., a description of the nature and extent of behavior or communication that would trigger a threat assessment inquiry or investigation;
- the description of the types of information that may be gathered during the assessment;
- the designation of the individuals or group of individuals who would be responsible for gathering and analyzing information; and
- the steps and procedures to be followed from initiation to conclusion of the threat assessment inquiry or investigation.

Information-Sharing in Support of the School Threat Assessment Process

Much emphasis in this *Guide* is placed upon the importance of sharing information about a student who may pose a risk of violence. In most previous school shootings, there was information available prior to the incident that suggested that the student was planning an attack at school.

However, when conducting an inquiry or investigation regarding a potential threat, the inquirer or investigator will find that different people in the student's life may have different–and possibly small–pieces of the puzzle. It is the responsibility of the threat assessment team to gather this information from what may be multiple

sources–teachers, parents, friends, guidance counselors, after-school program staff, part-time employers, and others.

Once information is gathered from the various sources contacted during a threat assessment inquiry, the threat assessment team may wish to explore options for storing this information in an accessible format. The team likewise may wish to consider keeping the information in a central location.

Legal Considerations in Developing Information-Sharing Policies and Procedures

Although the need to gather information about a student who may pose a threat of violence is clear, the ability to share this information requires some advance consideration. Laws, rules, regulations, and policies, for example, may place limitations on access to student records and restrict the use of accessible information in conjunction with investigations. In formulating information-sharing policies and procedures, threat assessment teams should consult with their respective school's–or school district's–legal counsel to ensure that team members are well-briefed on existing laws and regulations and their implications for the development of policies and procedures for accessing and disclosing student information. In particular, threat assessment teams should examine provisions of these laws and regulations to identify opportunities for including threatening situations in schools as exceptions to constraints on the disclosure of information contained in education records.

Two principal areas of law–federal statutes and state statutes–may affect access to and sharing of information about a particular student. An overview of the implications of these areas of law for conducting threat assessment investigations is provided in the following.

Federal Statutes

Under existing federal law, a school's authority to release information about a student is governed by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).[14] The intent of FERPA is to protect the privacy of "education records," a term that is defined as any records that contain information directly related to a student and that are maintained by the educational agency or institution or by a person acting for the agency or institution. Under provisions of FERPA, a school may not disclose personally identifiable information about a student from any education records without the prior written consent of the student's parent or, in the case of students who are 18 or older, the consent of the student.

FERPA does allow for various exceptions to privacy protections covering access to student records, specifying situations and conditions under which a school may disclose information from a student's education records without consent. A detailed analysis of these exceptions is beyond the scope of this *Guide*. However, there are two exceptions that are worth noting because of their specific relevance to accessing and sharing information for threat assessment inquiries:

- *Health and Safety Emergencies*: FERPA provides that schools *may disclose* information from a student's education records in situations where there is an immediate need to share that information in order to protect the health or safety of the student or others.[15] Under this exception, schools must define the term "health or safety emergency" narrowly and are permitted to disclose information from education records only to those individuals who need the information in order to protect the student and others.

- *Law Enforcement Unit Records*: FERPA regulations draw a distinction between records created by a school law enforcement unit for law

[14] 20 U.S. C. 1232g. See "Information Sharing" in the **Appendix**, **Annotated Resources**, of the *Guide* for referral to additional sources of information on FERPA.
[15] 34 CFR 99.31(a)(10).

enforcement purposes, such as the enforcement of a local, state, or federal law, and records created by a school law enforcement unit for non-law enforcement purposes, such as the enforcement of school policies concerning behavior or disciplinary actions. FERPA also distinguishes between student information that school law enforcement unit officials gathered from education records, and student information that unit officials obtained from other sources. With respect to disclosure of student information contained in school law enforcement unit records, FERPA provides that:

- Personally identifiable information about a student may be disclosed by school officials if that information is held in a school law enforcement unit record that was created to enforce a federal, state, or local law.
- Information in school law enforcement unit records that was not obtained from a student's education records may also be disclosed without the consent of the student's parents or the student.

It is important to note that FERPA regulations govern the disclosure of student information from education records and any information about the student that is based upon information contained in education records. FERPA regulations do not restrict the authority of school officials to share other information about a student that *is not* contained in education records. For example, information such as a school official's personal observations about or interactions with a student that is not contained in education records may be disclosed.

State Law and Access to Student Records

State laws governing access to and sharing of information about students vary from state to state. Moreover, in the wake of highly publicized school shootings in the 1990s, several states enacted laws that revise restrictions on disclosure of information

contained in student records. In some states, these amendments, in effect, make it easier to share this information among schools, law enforcement agencies, and others in furtherance of protecting the safety of students at school.[16]

2. Capacity to Conduct School Threat Assessments

Proactive planning is a critical element in the implementation of a school threat assessment program. School administrators should consider creating a multidisciplinary threat assessment team that is based in the school or the school district. Schools should not wait until a crisis occurs to establish a threat assessment team. Many schools across the country already have established teams to respond to a wide range of situations, from suicides to meeting special education needs. The expertise and knowledge of any existing teams may be useful in developing a threat assessment team.

The roles and responsibilities of the team as a whole, and of members of that team individually, should be clearly defined. The information gathering and assessment procedures to be used by the team should be formalized. Team members should be trained together in the threat assessment process. Multidisciplinary training sessions provide opportunities for professionals in different systems to build relationships and to consider how to address issues before a crisis arises. Training that uses practical exercises –"what should we do if…"–can enhance threat assessment and management programs and processes.

The multidisciplinary threat assessment team's principal responsibility is to guide the assessment and management of situations of concern. A senior school administrator should chair the team. Regular members of the team ideally should include: 1) a respected member of the school faculty or administration; 2) an investigator, such as a school resource officer or other police officer assigned to the school; 3) a mental health

[16] See "Information Sharing" in the **Appendix**, **Annotated Resources**, of the *Guide* for referrals to some of the more recent changes to state laws that affect access to and disclosure of student information contained in education records.

professional, such as a forensic psychologist, a clinical psychologist, or a school psychologist; and 4) other professionals, such as guidance counselors, teachers, coaches, and others, who may be able to contribute to the threat assessment process.

In addition, the chair of the threat assessment team may wish to consider including as an ad hoc member of the team someone who knows the student of concern in the threat assessment inquiry. This ad hoc position might be held by an individual from the school community, such as a teacher, counselor, coach, nurse, other school employee, or someone from the community who may know or have knowledge of the student, such as a probation officer, member of the clergy, or a social service worker.

If the student of concern is being provided services under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), a representative from the team that developed or manages that student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) also should be brought onto the threat assessment team as an ad hoc member for the inquiry regarding this particular student.

Skills and Training

Developing the capacity to conduct school threat assessments involves recruiting, training, and supporting professionals with special skills. The qualifications, skills, knowledge and experience of the members of the threat assessment team should include:

- a questioning, analytical, and skeptical mindset;
- an ability to relate well to parents, colleagues, other professionals, and students;
- familiarity with childhood and adolescent growth and development, the school environment, the need for safe schools, and the community;

- a reputation within the school and the community for fairness and trustworthiness;
- training in the collection and evaluation of information from multiple sources;
- discretion, and an appreciation for the importance of keeping information confidential, and of the possible harm that may result in the inappropriate release of information; and
- cognizance of the difference between harming and helping in an intervention.

3. Integrated Systems Relationships

In order to identify, assess, and manage students who might pose threats of targeted violence, a threat assessment program must build relationships among individuals and organizations both within the school and external to the school. These relationships can help the team acquire and use information about a given situation, and aid those with protective responsibilities in developing strategies to prevent targeted school violence.

Ideally, community systems concerned with education, safety, and child welfare would have well-established policies and procedures for cooperation and collaboration. In practice, these systems oftentimes are large and overburdened and tend to carry out their functions independently. In a well-functioning threat assessment program, effective systems relationships are most likely to occur between individuals, not institutions.

Individuals who build and maintain these relationships across disciplines and agencies are called "boundary spanners."[17] They serve as a formal link or liaison between various systems and meet regularly with them. Boundary spanners have credibility, respect, and strong interpersonal skills. In addition, they should understand

[17] Steadman, H., "Boundary Spanners: A Key Component for the Effective Interactions of the Justice and Mental Health Systems." Law and Human Behavior. 16 (February, 1992): 75-87.

the needs and operation of other systems. This understanding helps in integrating ongoing interagency relationships, in developing written protocols, and in facilitating the resolution of conflicts.

CHAPTER V

CONDUCTING A SCHOOL THREAT ASSESSMENT

This chapter focuses specifically on carrying out the threat assessment process. The sections that follow address the issue of identifying threatening situations; describe the information that should be sought in a threat assessment; identify potential sources of information; and set out 11 key questions that may provide members of the threat assessment team guidance in making judgments about whether a student of concern poses a threat.

The approach presented is highly detailed but should not be read as suggesting that most, or even many, threat assessments will require extensive or elaborate gathering and analysis of information. Threat assessments may be brief and limited, or extensive and complex. The facts of a situation, together with information developed about a student of concern, will determine the scope of the threat assessment process. Many situations can be understood and resolved after initial information-gathering and evaluation.

The Threat Assessment Process as a Continuum

In previous chapters of this *Guide*, the terms "threat assessment inquiry" and "threat assessment investigation" generally have been used interchangeably. In this chapter, threat assessment inquiries and threat assessment investigations will be addressed as two complementary parts of a threat assessment continuum. Under this model of the threat assessment process, evaluation of a threatening situation proceeds from a threat assessment inquiry, carried out by the school threat assessment team, to a threat assessment investigation, carried out by a law enforcement agency, if the initial inquiry determines that there is a valid threat of targeted school violence.

There may be several "right ways" to designate responsibility for conducting a threat assessment. One community or school system may decide to give primary responsibility to specially trained law enforcement professionals. Another may keep responsibility for most threat assessment and management within the school system. Still other communities develop "blended" systems. School, law enforcement, and community leaders should consider the principles of threat assessment, the functions needed for a successful program, and local resources and relationships before deciding what delineation of responsibilities makes the most sense.

The threat assessment process is being presented in this manner as a means of underscoring the proposition that not all situations that become the focus of school threat assessment inquiries will require referral to and follow-up threat assessment investigations by law enforcement officials. For example, some preliminary inquiries by members of the school threat assessment team will find that information about a student was false or unfounded, or that the behavior of the student who is the subject of this inquiry does not present a risk of targeted violence and can be managed by school administrators and other officials on an informal basis. The situations examined in these inquiries do not pose threats to the school, the student body, or the community, and therefore generally would not be referred to law enforcement agencies. By contrast, threat assessment inquiries that conclude that a valid threat of targeted school violence exists will require referral to law enforcement officials for further investigation.

Central Distinctions Between Threat Assessment Inquiries and Investigations

The central distinctions between a threat assessment inquiry and a threat assessment investigation are defined by the management of these two parts of the threat assessment continuum. The primary objective of both a threat assessment inquiry and an investigation is to determine whether a particular student poses a threat of targeted school violence. Both an inquiry and an investigation ask "Is there information to

suggest that this student is on the path to an attack? What is the risk of targeted violence?"

A threat assessment inquiry is initiated and controlled by school authorities (often with law enforcement consultation and participation). Information is gathered at the school and by persons known to the school. If information collected suggests that the student of concern is considering mounting an attack at school, it may be appropriate to refer the situation to law enforcement for an investigation. Also, if information gathered in a threat assessment inquiry suggests that it is likely that a violation of law has occurred, it may be appropriate to refer the situation to law enforcement.

A threat assessment investigation also asks: "Does this student pose a threat of targeted violence?" In addition, investigators may ask: "Has this student violated a law?"

With respect to their management, the threat assessment inquiry and the threat assessment investigation differ as follows:

- threat assessment inquiries are initiated, conducted, and controlled by the school threat assessment team;
- threat assessment investigations are initiated, conducted, and controlled by law enforcement agencies.

The line between a threat assessment inquiry and a threat assessment investigation–the point along the threat assessment continuum at which a school threat assessment team decides that a threatening situation must be referred to a law enforcement agency for investigation–will be determined by the school threat assessment team in consultation with school administrators and law enforcement officials. These determinations, in turn, will be made on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, in developing policies and procedures for carrying out a threat assessment inquiry, the

threat assessment program should establish a general threshold for initiating inquiries and referring threatening situations to law enforcement agencies.

Identifying Students of Concern

As discussion of the threat assessment process in this *Guide* indicates, that process is not about the wholesale examination of the student body to identify students who may be at risk of committing acts of targeted school violence. Instead, threat assessment is a tool for responding to threatening situations in which there is concern about a particular student who has come to the attention of school administrators or other authorities.

Students who become the focus of threat assessment inquiries and investigations may come to the attention of authorities in a number of ways.

Circumstances that Bring a Student to Official Attention

Some students may bring themselves to the attention of authorities by engaging in communications that cause concern:

- A student submits a story for an English assignment about a character that shoots other students in his school.
- Two students in a video class make a movie about kids who bring bombs to school.
- A dean receives an e-mail stating, "I'm going to kill everyone in this asylum."
- A seventh-grader, who is known to be feared by his classmates, cocks a finger at another boy on the playground and says "you're gonna die."
- The personal Web page of a high-achieving student has links to Web pages with information about cyanide.

In each of the situations described above, a student has behaved in a manner that causes concern to school administrators and other authorities. Each situation requires some kind of follow-up inquiry or investigation. In each case, the identity of the student is known or potentially knowable. In some cases, the student's communication is a direct threat. In other cases, the communication is ambiguous.

Other students of concern come to the attention of authorities through second or third parties:

- A school bus driver tells the principal of a school that a group of students has been overheard whispering about bringing a gun to school.
- A ninth-grader reports that he has been threatened by another student and warned not to tell anybody about the threat.
- A student reports overhearing a lunchroom conversation between two other students in which one of the students says that he "isn't going to take it any more. I'm going to get even for good."
- A neighbor of a student calls the school to report suspicions that the student is experimenting with bomb-making materials.

In still other cases, students come to the attention of authorities through anonymous communications:

- A parent anonymously calls a tip line to report concerns about the behavior of a student.
- The school district superintendent's office receives an anonymous call stating that a bomb will go off in one of the middle schools at 1:45 p.m.

- An anonymous letter signed "Fans of Eric and Dylan Club" arrives at a high school. The letter states "Remember Columbine" and warns that "Judgment Day" is coming.

Information provided anonymously requires careful evaluation by the school threat assessment team. Some information may be accurate. Some information may be partial or incomplete. Some may be false and/or fabricated with malicious intent.

In situations where a student is not easily identifiable from an anonymous communication, more sophisticated identification techniques may be required. These methods and techniques may necessitate involvement of law enforcement organizations, particularly in situations where there are anonymous warnings of imminent danger, such as bomb threats.

Managing Communications about Students of Concern

Policies regarding the handling of communications that raise concerns about students should address the following topics:

- Establishing low barriers for reporting for those who may have information of concern.[18]

- Advising students and adults of the kinds of information that should be brought forward: threats; weapon-seeking and weapon-using behavior; homicidal and suicidal behaviors; behaviors suggesting that a young person is contemplating, or planning, an attack.

- Ensuring that a thoughtful process is put in place in the school or school district to assess information that is brought forward about a potential

[18] There is a growing body of literature on lowering barriers for persons with concerns and on integrated conflict management systems that may be of interest to school administrators. See for example Designing Integrated Conflict Management Systems: Guidelines for Practitioners and Decision Makers in

attacker. This process should be perceived as credible by students and adults.

- Recognizing that what is reported may often be different than what actually was said or occurred.
- Establishing and continually reinforcing a policy that it is everyone's responsibility to help develop and maintain a respectful, safe school environment.
- Reinforcing positive behaviors by teachers, students, and staff in the school.
- Building linkages to individuals, groups, and organizations that can offer support and assistance to students and to the school. Sometimes these persons and groups may provide information that can help prevent targeted violent attacks.

Creating a Central Point of Contact

Individuals who have information about students that is cause for concern should know how to refer this information and to whom. The threat assessment team should designate a member of the team to serve as the initial point of contact for information of possible concern. The availability of this point of contact should be made known community-wide. An anonymous tip line may be of use if there is a process in place to carefully evaluate the information that is received by means of this approach. The threat assessment team member who serves as initial point of contact will screen information and determine whether to initiate a threat assessment inquiry or to consult other members of the team.

Organizations, Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution, 2001, http://www.spidr.org/article/icmsD.html

Schools should publicize the name of the designated point of contact to faculty, staff, parents, and students as the person to contact with any information of potential concern. Students, faculty, staff, and parents should be instructed and encouraged to bring forward information about any activity that evokes concern about possible targeted violence. Information of interest includes threatening statements and writings; behavior that indicates that an attack is being planned; and attempts to acquire weapons.

Individuals who provide information concerning a student should receive follow-up acknowledgments of their communications from the central point of contact, such as: "We have carefully considered the information you shared with us" or "We appreciate your bringing this situation to attention." A follow-up acknowledgment can be made without revealing confidential or inappropriate information, and it reinforces the proposition that individuals in the community can play an important role in alerting school officials and other authorities of suspected threatening situations.

The Threat Assessment Inquiry

This section describes the process for conducting a threat assessment inquiry. The information developed during the inquiry will inform the threat assessment team's analysis of a potentially threatening situation and provide the basis for deciding whether that situation should be referred to a law enforcement agency for a threat assessment investigation.

In the event that a threatening situation is referred to a law enforcement agency, the information gathered and analyzed by the threat assessment team during the threat assessment inquiry will be forwarded to the investigative law enforcement agency. That information will provide direction to police officials' more in-depth examination of the behaviors and communications of the student of concern.

When should a threat assessment inquiry be initiated?

When information about a student's behavior and communications passes an agreed-upon threshold of concern, school officials should initiate a threat assessment inquiry. Upon receiving information concerning a potentially threatening situation, the threat assessment team must first consider: "How much time do we have?" An inquiry should be initiated immediately (within hours of notification) in any situation of concern.

If information concerning a threatening situation suggests that violence is imminent–for example, a student has acquired a weapon and is on his way to the school with the intention of shooting another student–that matter of course should be referred immediately to police.

When information is received concerning a potentially threatening situation, the safety of the school and the community is the priority consideration. The threat assessment team therefore should consider how to handle a student of concern while an inquiry or investigation is being conducted. In making decisions about how to handle a student pending the outcome of a threat assessment inquiry or investigation, care should be exercised to ensure that a student of concern is not treated inappropriately, since any allegations regarding the behavior or perceived dangerousness of the student may be unfounded.

What information should be sought in an inquiry?

Once a decision has been made to conduct an inquiry, the threat assessment team should develop an information plan. A school threat assessment inquiry should seek information in five areas:

1. **The facts that drew attention to the student, the situation, and possibly the targets**

The first area of inquiry concerns how the student came to the attention of school officials. What behaviors and/or communications were reported, and by whom? What

was the situation? Who, if anyone, witnessed the reported behavior of concern? What was the context for the reported behavior, i.e., what else was going on at the time of the reported behavior?

Individuals who report information about possible threatening situations may have multiple motives. Alleged accounts of behaviors may be inaccurate and may be subjective interpretations of events. Careful attention to the facts–with corroboration wherever possible–will help determine whether the situation warrants scrutiny.

2. Information about the student

Three kinds of general information about a student should be gathered: identifiers, background information, and information about the student's current life situation and circumstances.

A. Identifying information:

- name;
- physical description;
- date of birth; and
- identification numbers.

B. Background information:

- residences;
- family/home situation;
- academic performance;
- social networks;
- history of relationships and conflicts;
- history of harassing others or of being harassed by others;
- history of violence toward self and others;
- history of having been a victim of violence or bullying;

- known attitudes toward violence;
- criminal behavior;
- mental health/substance abuse history;
- access to and use of weapons; and
- history of grievances and grudges.

C. Current life information:

- present stability of living and home situations;
- nature and quality of current relationships and personal support;
- recent losses or losses of status (shame, humiliation, recent breakup or loss of significant relationship);
- current grievances or grudges;
- perceptions of being treated unfairly;
- known difficulty coping with a stressful event;
- any "downward" progression in social, academic, behavioral, or psychological functioning;
- recent hopelessness, desperation, and/or despair, including suicidal thoughts, gestures, actions, or attempts; and
- pending crises or change in circumstances.

Of particular note is whether the student has any trusting relationships with adults who are emotionally available to him or her, or whether the student is known to be consistently respectful to any adult. If there is an adult who is "connected" to the student, that adult may have useful information about the student's thinking and behavior. In addition, such an adult may be able to help the student if he or she appears to be on a path toward mounting a targeted school attack.

3. Information about "attack-related" behaviors

Examination of the thinking and behaviors of school shooters suggests that most attacks are preceded by discernible behaviors, as the student plans or prepares for the attack. These behaviors are referred to as attack-related behaviors.

Behaviors that should raise concern about potential violence include:

- ideas or plans about injuring him/herself or attacking a school or persons at school;
- communications or writings that suggest that the student has an unusual or worrisome interest in school attacks;
- comments that express or imply the student is considering mounting an attack at school;
- recent weapon-seeking behavior, especially if weapon-seeking is linked to ideas about attack or expressions about interest in attack;
- communications or writings suggesting the student condones or is considering violence to redress a grievance or solve a problem; and
- rehearsals of attacks or ambushes.

4. Motives

Motives for actual school attacks have included:

- revenge for a perceived injury or grievance;
- yearning for attention, recognition, or notoriety;
- a wish to solve a problem otherwise seen as unbearable; and
- a desire to die or be killed.

Knowledge of the motives of a student of concern may help the threat assessment team in evaluating the risk of targeted violence. Understanding the circumstances that may have prompted a student to consider attacking others may permit authorities to direct the student away from violence.

For example, a student who feels he has been treated wrongly and unfairly by a teacher or an administrator and who is thinking about "revenge" may be offered or taught non-violent ways to address his concerns and problems. Mediation; personal support; clarification about the disciplinary process; education about how to write a letter of concern to authorities who might intervene in the student's problems; or other dispute resolution efforts might turn that student away from a potentially violent course of action. A student who is suicidal and who wants to get "even" with his bullies before ending his life may be provided mental health services and support. In addition, school administrators should intervene on this student's behalf to stop the bullying.

As stated in previous chapters of this *Guide*, students make threats and engage in other risky behaviors for a range of reasons. Many threatening statements and actions do not reflect the student's actual movement on a path to attack. Adolescents occasionally say and do "outrageous" things, so a single utterance or action should not be seen as determinative in a threat assessment.[19]

5. Target Selection

Most school shooters identified their targets to friends and fellow students before advancing the attack. Almost half of school shooters had more than one target. Threat assessors should consider whether and how a potential attacker's interest in a target may shift to another target over time. Information about a student's targets may provide clues to the student's motives, planning, and attack-related behaviors. Information about the student's motives also may inform the question of whether there are additional targets.

What are sources of information for the inquiry?

[19] Please note that all comments and behaviors should be understood in their context: the words "kill him" may have very different meanings at a football game when linemen are chasing the quarterback than in a hallway after a student has been bullied and tormented.

1. School Information

A school threat assessment inquiry should begin with what is known about the student from records, teacher interviews, and other information easily accessed at the school and from school officials. In utilizing information from school records in a threat assessment inquiry, the threat assessment team should follow school policies and relevant laws regarding information-sharing.[20]

Answers to the following questions may be drawn from information at school:

- Is the student well known to any adult at the school?
- Has the student come to attention for any behavior of concern? If so, what? (e-mail, Web site, posters, papers, rule-breaking, violence, harassment, adjustment problems, depression or despair, acting-out behavior, etc.)
- Has the student experienced serious difficulties or been in distress?
- Is there anyone with whom the student shares worries, frustrations, and/or sorrows?
- Is there information that the student has considered ending his or her life?
- Has the student been a victim and/or an initiator of hostile, harassing, or bullying behavior directed toward other students, teachers, or other staff?
- Is the student known to have an interest in weapons? If so, has he or she made efforts to acquire or use weapons? Does the student live in a home in which there are weapons (whether or not the weapons are secured)?

2. Collateral School Interviews

[20] See **Chapter IV** of this *Guide* for a more in-depth discussion of the issue of information-sharing.

Students and adults who know the student who is the subject of the threat assessment inquiry should be asked about communications or other behaviors that may indicate the student of concern's ideas or intent. The focus of these interviews should be factual:

- What was said? To whom?
- What was written? To whom?
- What was done?
- When and where did this occur?
- Who else observed this behavior?
- Did the student say why he or she acted as they did?

Bystanders, observers, and other people who were there when the student engaged in threatening behaviors or made threatening statements should be queried about whether any of these behaviors or statements concerned or worried them. These individuals should be asked about changes in the student's attitudes and behaviors. Likewise, they should be asked if they have become increasingly concerned about the student's behavior or state of mind.

However, individuals interviewed generally should not be asked to characterize the student or interpret meanings of communications that the student may have made. Statements such as "I think he's really dangerous" or "he said it with a smile, so I knew that he must be joking" may not be accurate characterizations of the student's intent, and therefore are unlikely to be useful to the threat assessment team in carrying out a threat assessment inquiry.

3. Parent/Guardian Interview

The parents or guardians of the student of concern usually should be interviewed.

Parents may be protective of their children. They may be frightened and/or embarrassed about the inquiry and the possibility that their child may be contemplating a violent act. The threat assessment team therefore should make it clear to the student's parents, or guardians that the objective of the threat assessment inquiry is not only to help prevent targeted school violence and diminish the chance that the student and possibly others would be harmed, but also to help their child.

The threat assessment team should seek the help of the student's parents in understanding the student's actions and interests, recognizing that parents may or may not know much about their child's thinking and behavior. Questions for parents should focus on the student's behaviors and communications, especially those that might be attack-related. The student's interest in weapons should be explored, as well as his or her access to weapons at home.

It may be useful for a member of the threat assessment team to visit and observe the student of concern's home. The threat assessment team should have policies and procedures in place regarding home visits.

4. Interviews with the Student of Concern

Interviews with a student of concern oftentimes are critical in a threat assessment inquiry. School administrators and law enforcement officials and their respective legal counsels should follow existing policies, or develop policies regarding interviews with students of concern. Issues that should be considered include:

- If and when to notify parents/guardians of an interview;
- Whether or when to invite parents/guardians to be present during an interview;

- Whether and how to use information from an interview for criminal justice proceedings; and
- Whether and when legal representation should be allowed, offered, or provided.

State and local laws differ with respect to requirements regarding these questions.

In some instances, the threat assessment team may determine that important information might be obtained through a search of a student's person or property, or the property of another individual to which the student has access. The search of a student in any context is a sensitive and legally complex issue that should be examined thoroughly by school administrators and their legal counsel and addressed in policies and procedures governing the conduct of a threat assessment inquiry.[21]

The primary purpose of a student interview is to learn about the student's thinking, motives, and behavior. The tone of the interview should be professional, neutral, and non-confrontational, rather than accusatory or judgmental.

Before conducting an interview with a student of concern, the threat assessment team should be well acquainted with the facts that brought the student to the attention of school administrators and others. In addition, prior to conducting the student interview, the threat assessment team should have reviewed available information concerning the student's background, interests, and behaviors. Background information can inform the threat assessment team's approach to and questioning of the student. This information may help the threat assessment team determine whether the student poses a threat to particular targets. In addition, knowledge of background information concerning the student prior to the interview may help the threat assessment team judge whether the student is forthcoming and straightforward. Generally, a student should be asked

directly about his or her intentions. Often, adolescents will respond forthrightly to a direct question.

A student interview conducted during a threat assessment inquiry can elicit important information that permits the threat assessment team to better understand the situation of the student and possible targets. This understanding, in turn, will help the threat assessment team to assess the risk of violence that the student may pose in a given situation. Interviews with a student of concern also can generate leads for further inquiry.

An interview can also send the message to the student that his or her behavior has been noticed and has caused concern. Interviews give students of concern the opportunity to tell their personal stories, to be heard, and to reassess and redirect their behavior away from activities that are of concern. The interview may suggest to a student who has mixed feelings about attacking that there are people who are interested in his or her welfare, and that there are better, more effective ways to deal with problems or with specific people.

Although an interview with a student of concern can provide valuable information, relying too heavily on that interview as a basis for making judgments about whether that student poses a threat may present problems. The information offered by the student may be incomplete, misleading, or inaccurate. It therefore is important to collect information to corroborate and verify information learned from the student interview.

5. Potential Target Interview

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[21] The U.S. Supreme Court has established that Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable search and seizure apply to students on school property, but the Court has recognized school officials' authority to conduct searches that are reasonable (*New Jersey v. T.L.O.*).

Individuals who have been identified as potential targets of the student of concern also should be interviewed. The threat assessment team should inform the subject of the interview that the primary purpose of that interview is to gather information about a possible situation of concern.

A potential target should be asked about their relationship to the student of concern and queried about recent interactions with that student. The interviewer should gather information about grievances and grudges that the student of concern may hold against a target or against others.

Interviews with potential targets should be conducted with special sensitivity. Care must be taken to gather information without unduly alarming a potential target. If the threat assessment team believes that there may be a risk of violence to an identified target, that target should be offered assistance and support.

How should information be organized and analyzed?

- Information gathered in a threat assessment inquiry should be examined for evidence of behavior and conditions that suggest that the student of concern is planning and preparing for an attack. Analysis of this information should, in the end, answer these questions: Is the behavior of the student consistent with movement on a pathway toward attack? Do the student's current situation and setting incline him or her toward or away from targeted violence?

Evaluation of information gathered from research and interviews conducted during a threat assessment inquiry should be guided by the following eleven key questions:

1. **What are the student's motive(s) and goals?**

    - What motivated the student to make the statements or take the actions that caused him or her to come to attention?

- Does the situation or circumstance that led to these statements or actions still exist?
- Does the student have a major grievance or grudge? Against whom?
- What efforts have been made to resolve the problem and what has been the result? Does the potential attacker feel that any part of the problem is resolved or see any alternatives?

2. **Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack?**

   - What, if anything, has the student communicated to someone else (targets, friends, other students, teachers, family, others) or written in a diary, journal, or Web site concerning his or her ideas and/or intentions?
   - Have friends been alerted or "warned away"?

3. **Has the subject shown inappropriate interest in any of the following?**

   - school attacks or attackers;
   - weapons (including recent acquisition of any relevant weapon);
   - incidents of mass violence (terrorism, workplace violence, mass murderers).

4. **Has the student engaged in attack-related behaviors? These behaviors might include:**

   - developing an attack idea or plan;
   - making efforts to acquire or practice with weapons;
   - casing, or checking out, possible sites and areas for attack;
   - rehearsing attacks or ambushes.

5. **Does the student have the *capacity* to carry out an act of targeted violence?**

    - How organized is the student's thinking and behavior?
    - Does the student have the means, e.g., access to a weapon, to carry out an attack?

6. **Is the student experiencing hopelessness, desperation and/or despair?**

    - Is there information to suggest that the student is experiencing desperation and/or despair?
    - Has the student experienced a recent failure, loss and/or loss of status?
    - Is the student known to be having difficulty coping with a stressful event?
    - Is the student now, or has the student ever been, suicidal or "accident-prone"? Has the student engaged in behavior that suggests that he or she has considered ending their life?

7. **Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?**

    - Does the student have at least one relationship with an adult where the student feels that he or she can confide in the adult and believes that the adult will listen without judging or jumping to conclusions? (Students with trusting relationships with adults may be directed away from violence and despair and toward hope.)
    - Is the student emotionally connected to–or disconnected from–other students?

- Has the student previously come to someone's attention or raised concern in a way that suggested he or she needs intervention or supportive services?

8. **Does the student see violence as an acceptable–or desirable–or the only–way to solve problems?**
    - Does the setting around the student (friends, fellow students, parents, teachers, adults) explicitly or implicitly support or endorse violence as a way of resolving problems or disputes?
    - Has the student been "dared" by others to engage in an act of violence?

9. **Is the student's conversation and "story" consistent with his or her actions?**
    - Does information from collateral interviews and from the student's own behavior confirm or dispute what the student says is going on?

10. **Are other people concerned about the student's potential for violence?**
    - Are those who know the student concerned that he or she might take action based on violent ideas or plans?
    - Are those who know the student concerned about a specific target?
    - Have those who know the student witnessed recent changes or escalations in mood and behavior?

11. **What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an attack?**

- What factors in the student's life and/or environment might increase or decrease the likelihood that the student will attempt to mount an attack at school?
- What is the response of other persons who know about the student's ideas or plan to mount an attack? (Do those who know about the student's ideas actively discourage the student from acting violently, encourage the student to attack, deny the possibility of violence, passively collude with an attack, etc.?)

Thoughtful consideration of the answers to the above 11 questions will produce a sound foundation for the threat assessment team's response to the overarching question in a threat assessment inquiry: Does the student of concern pose a threat of targeted violence at school? If the threat assessment team concludes that:

a. there is enough reliable information to answer the 11 key questions; and

b. the weight of the information is convincing that the student *does not pose* a threat of targeted school violence; then

c. the threat assessment team may conclude the threat assessment inquiry.

The threat assessment team may determine that closure of the inquiry is warranted, but conclude that the student, or previously suggested targets, need help coping with the behavior or problems that initially brought the threatening situation to the attention of authorities. In such situations, the team should work with school administrators and others to ensure that these individuals receive the assistance and continued support that they may need.

For example, if the student who was the focus of the threat assessment inquiry came to the attention of authorities because of behavior or communications that suggested that he or she was contemplating suicide, that student should be offered–and

receive–appropriate counseling or other services. Likewise, if the threat assessment team concludes that the student was a victim of false allegations, the team may wish to consider recommending actions to deal with malicious accusers.

Regardless of the outcome of the threat assessment inquiry, the threat assessment team should document carefully the inquiry and any actions taken. This documentation should be carried out in compliance with any applicable school or other relevant policies and/or legal considerations, and should include a record of the sources of, and content for, all key information considered in the threat assessment as well as the date that the information was acquired. In addition to documenting the facts that provided the basis for the findings in the threat assessment inquiry, it also is important to document the reasoning that led the threat assessment team to its decision in that inquiry.

If the team concludes that

a. there is insufficient information for the threat assessment team to be reasonably certain that the student does not pose a threat; *or*

b. the student appears to be on a path to attack; then

c. the team should recommend that the matter be referred to the appropriate law enforcement agency for a threat assessment investigation.

The Threat Assessment Investigation

As explained earlier in this chapter, the focus of a threat assessment investigation–the information sought and questions asked–will be similar to that of a threat assessment inquiry. However, the scope of the threat assessment investigation's collection and analysis of information will be broader than in an inquiry, reaching outside the school and across systems within the community.

In carrying out a threat assessment investigation, investigators should explore a student's prior contacts with civil authorities and criminal and juvenile justice officials. These investigators may re-interview, in greater depth, individuals contacted during the threat assessment inquiry, such as a student's family members; fellow students and friends; neighbors; and employers. Investigators will focus particularly on attack-related behaviors exhibited by the student, including efforts to acquire, buy, or gain access to weapons.

Investigators also may request the permission of the student or his parents to search a student's computer, room, home, car, or workspace. In some cases, investigators may seek to obtain search warrants.

Investigators should evaluate information gathered during a threat assessment investigation in accord with the 11 key questions identified in the above discussion of procedures for conducting a threat assessment inquiry. Threat assessment investigators may consult with colleagues and with professionals in other fields and disciplines who possess special skills and experience in handling situations involving potential targeted violence. These professionals may include other law enforcement officers, mental health service providers, social workers, physicians, and others knowledgeable about stalking, domestic violence, and workplace violence. The knowledge, experience, and insights of these professionals may help the threat assessment investigator in evaluating and organizing information concerning situations that involve the threat of targeted school violence.

In addition, as investigators proceed with a threat assessment investigation, they continuously should ask themselves the following questions:

- Does the information collected prompt more concern or less concern about the possibility that the student is moving on a path toward a school attack?
- What information might prompt less concern?

- What information might heighten concern?
- What options exist for intervening in the behavior of or redirecting the student away from ideas of or plans for a school attack?
- Should potential targets be contacted, warned, and/or protected?

As with a threat assessment inquiry, it is critical that investigators document and keep a record of the information that they gather and evaluate in carrying out a school threat assessment investigation. A well-documented record provides baseline information about a student's thinking and actions at a certain point in time. This information can be useful if the student comes to authorities' attention again, or if at some point in the future investigators need to determine whether the subject has changed patterns of thinking and behavior. Also, should a threatening situation result in civil or criminal action against a student or others, a carefully documented investigative file will be an important asset in demonstrating that a threat assessment investigation was conducted properly and in compliance with applicable laws, policies, and procedures.

CHAPTER VI

MANAGING A THREATENING SITUATION

Threat assessment and threat management are integrated and interdependent functions. Many students who come to the attention of threat assessment teams may need help and support. Assisting, directing, and managing these young people and the situations they are in should be high priorities for threat assessment team members.

When the findings of a threat assessment inquiry or investigation suggest that a student has the interest, motive, and ability to mount a school attack, and has started down a path toward attack, the primary mission is to prevent the attack and protect possible targets. Accordingly, an individual management/monitoring plan should be developed for any student who is identified in a threat assessment inquiry or investigation as posing a threat of targeted school violence.

Key Components and Functions of a Management Strategy

Who should manage the threatening situation, and what the components of the plan are, will depend on the specific threatening situation. For example, a student who is under the jurisdiction of the juvenile or criminal justice system could be supervised or managed by court or justice system officials. If the student remains in school, school administrators might work with parents to impose and monitor the student's compliance with a supervision or management plan.

Successful management of a threatening situation requires substantial time and effort. Management of these situations comprises three related functions:

1. controlling/containing the situation and/or student in a way that will prevent the possibility of an attack;

2. protecting and aiding possible targets; and

3. providing support and guidance to help the student deal successfully with his or her problems.

Considerations in Developing a Management Strategy

Managing Threatening Situations for the Short Term

Managing a student of concern involves short-term and longer-term considerations. In the short term, after a threat assessment investigation has concluded that a student poses a risk of targeted school violence, authorities must move immediately to intervene with that student to contain the threatening situation and reduce the potential for violence.

In some cases, subjecting the student to a threat assessment inquiry or investigation may have the added effect of containing future threatening behavior. As a result of the inquiry or investigation, the potential attacker receives help in addressing the problems that may have prompted his or her action and abandons plans for the attack, believing that an attack is not feasible or necessary.

In other situations, there must be more overt containment of potential attackers. Containment and control in these situations may include supervision and/or confinement of the student of concern and the protection of possible targets.

Managing Threatening Situations for the Long Term

Once the immediate threat of a situation is believed to be under control for the short term, the threat assessment team should turn its attention to longer term safety. The threat assessment team should address two central questions: What steps should be taken to contain a potential attacker over the longer-term? What course of action should be pursued to deter the potential attacker from posing a future threat of violence?

The primary goal in a school threat assessment is to prevent an attack. The intervention or management strategy selected therefore should be the one with the greatest potential for long-term *preventive* power.

Threat managers should ask: "What will be the most effective and least damaging course of action?" When confronted with a problem, professionals often choose the tools with which they are most familiar: Police officers arrest; Mental health professionals commit; Workplace managers fire; Principals suspend or expel. Caution should be used in a given situation of concern to make sure that the response of authorities is appropriate to the problem.

The most familiar response may or may not be the best response, the best course of action for the longer term. For example, school administrators may feel pressured to "get tough" or "set an example," by suspending or expelling a student who threatens to bring a weapon to school. However, suspension or expulsion of a student can create the risk of triggering either an immediate or a delayed violent response unless such actions are coupled with containment and support. A student who is expelled may conclude: "I have lost everything. I have only a short time to act. I will give them what they deserve." Acting upon those beliefs, the student may return to school with weapons and attack others. In addition, a student who is suspended or expelled without alternative educational placement may be under less supervision than if he or she were to remain in a school setting.

Those with responsibility to manage a student assessed as posing a threat of targeted violence should consider options for the long term management of threatening situations in the context of the primary goal of prevention. The response with the greatest punitive power may or may not have the greatest preventive power. Although arresting a student may be necessary in a particular situation, without careful attention to the need for confinement, weapons removal, or interpersonal intervention, that action

may be insufficient to prevent an eventual attack at school or otherwise protect a target. Similarly, referring a student to the mental health system, without seeing that referral in the context of an overall monitoring/management plan, may not be sufficient to prevent targeted violence.

An Integrated Systems Approach to Managing Threatening Situations

The Safe School Initiative found that school attackers' formulation of ideas about carrying out an attack oftentimes followed failed efforts to solve problems and reduce emotional pain through nonviolent means. Helping a student to see that he or she has a future, and directing that student to effective, non-violent ways to resolve disputes and conflicts, takes sensitivity, commitment, and an integrated systems approach to meeting the needs of that student.

An integrated systems approach can enhance the potential effectiveness of both short- and long-term strategies for managing threatening situations. Those responsible for managing a situation and student of concern–school officials, law enforcement officers, mental health professionals, youth service workers, court, probation, or correctional staff–should identify existing resources within the community that can play roles in managing students who pose threats of targeted school violence.

Discontinuation of Monitoring

A key focus of the threat assessment process is to connect the student to services and support systems that provide encouragement and hope, and reduce the likelihood that the student will engage in future threatening behavior. The ultimate objective is to enable the student to function without monitoring by responsible adult authorities.

Monitoring of a student may be discontinued after responsible authorities have completed the following tasks:

- Assessing whether (and to what extent) the student has changed unacceptable thinking and behavior over time; and

- Developing and supporting intervention strategies that encourage and help the student to change.

After a determination is made that the subject no longer poses a threat of targeted school violence, formal monitoring is ended. However, the student still may remain involved with service systems within the community that will support his or her continued successful functioning.

CHAPTER VII

ACTION PLANS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS: CREATING A SAFE AND CONNECTED SCHOOL CLIMATE AND IMPLEMENTING A THREAT ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Creating a Safe and Connected School Climate

Creating cultures and climates of safety is essential to the prevention of violence in schools. How can a school, its teachers and administrators, and its students work toward implementing cultures of connection and climates of safety?

Major Components and Tasks for Creating a Safe/Connected School Climate

1. *Assess the school's emotional climate.*

   Although no one wants to believe that this country's educational institutions are anything other than safe and positive environments that support the learning experience, it is incumbent upon those in positions of responsibility to take a "step back" and gain perspective on the emotional climate of their schools. This perspective can be gained by systematically surveying students, faculty, and other important "stakeholders," such as parents, administrators, school board members, and representatives of community groups who interact with the school about the emotional climate of schools. Anonymous surveys, face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and psychological measures integrated into a total assessment package all have been used to varying degrees to gather key "real time" data. It is essential that school administrators, parents, and community leaders not assume that they know school climates as do those individuals–especially students–who are most directly affected by the educational experience on a daily basis. Absent a thorough assessment of climate

process, school officials and leaders may never have the opportunity to find out what they did not know.

The findings of climate surveys can inform efforts to plan ways to enhance safety and respect within the educational environment. It is important to give feedback about school climate data to all involved and affected parties. Sharing climate data establishes a foundation for building an integrated systems approach that will bring the central "players" to the table; empower students to make change; and connect the school to the community and parental support.

2. *Emphasize the importance of listening in schools.*

Pupils must listen respectfully to adults and to their peers, and teachers, administrators, and other adults must listen respectfully to their students and to each other. Grownups often expect that students listen to adults in authority. However, all too frequently adults forget that respectful listening is a "two-way street." A school with a culture of "two-way listening" will encourage and empower students to have the courage to break the ingrained code of silence.

Listening also must be expanded beyond academic concerns. Communications between teachers and students also should include listening to feelings, especially those of hurt and pain. In addition, it is important to "listen" to behaviors. Many students, including some who consider violence an appropriate way to solve problems, have a difficult time finding the words to articulate the disenfranchisement, hurt, or fear that they may feel. Not knowing how to express their problems and feelings may prompt these students to take action. Adults who listen to behavior and assist students in learning how to articulate their feelings and experiences provide students with critical skills that can contribute to preventing and reducing violence.

3. *Take a strong, but caring stance against the code of silence.*

Silence leaves hurt unexposed and unacknowledged. Silence may encourage a young person to move along a path to violence.

4. *Work actively to change the perception that talking to an adult about a student contemplating violence is considered "snitching."*

   A school climate in which students connect to each other and to adults is one that promotes a safe and secure educational environment. A student who finds the courage to tell a caring adult about a friend in pain may save a life.

5. *Find ways to stop bullying.*

   Bullying is a continuum of abuse, ranging from verbal taunts to physical threats to dangerous acts.[22] Bullying is not playful behavior. In bullying, one student assumes power by word or deed over another in a mean-spirited and/or harmful manner. In a school with a culture of safety and connection, both the bully and the student who is the victim of the bullying are attended to in a respectful manner. Schools with climates of safety and respect are establishing foundations for pro-social behavior. These climates teach conflict resolution, peer mediation, active listening, and other non-violent ways to solve problems. In a safe school climate, adults do not bully students and do not bully each other,–and they do not turn a blind eye to bullying behavior when they know that it is going on in the school.

6. *Empower students by involving them in planning, creating, and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect.*

   Creating a safe school climate is a process that should involve all members of the school community, including teachers, students, parents, counselors, administrators, health staff, security professionals, and support personnel. Climates of safety should be collaborative ones. Helping students to engage in

positive, productive activities or work in their local community can diminish isolation and enhance connection and safety.

7. *Ensure that every student feels that he or she has a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school.*

   Trusting relationships between adults and students are the products of quality connection, interaction, and communications. These relationships evolve and do not develop simply because an adult, such as a homeroom teacher or a guidance counselor, and a student have been ordered or assigned to interact with one another. Schools with cultures and climates of safety monitor students on a regular basis. School administrators should take steps to ensure that at least one adult at school knows what is happening with each student.

8. *Create mechanisms for developing and sustaining safe school climates.*

   A mechanism for developing and sustaining safe school climates should serve as a vehicle for planning and monitoring the climate and culture of the school. This mechanism may involve administrators, teachers, counselors, students, school law enforcement and security staff, and other personnel. Questions to be considered in implementing this mechanism might include: What should be done to develop and support climates of safety? To what extent are teachers, administrators, and other school staff encouraged to focus on students' social/emotional learning needs? How close is the school to achieving the goal of ensuring that every student feels that there is an adult to whom he or she can turn for talk, support, and advice if things get tough?

9. *Be aware of physical environments and their effects on creating comfort zones.*

   Building structure, facility safety plans, lighting, space, and architecture, among other physical attributes of educational institutions, all can contribute to whether

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[22] For more detailed references on bullying, please refer to the Appendix.

a school environment feels, or is in fact, safe or unsafe. In large schools, school administrators may wish to explore changes in the physical characteristics of the school that would permit the assignment of teachers and students to smaller, mutually intersecting and supportive groupings within the broader educational community.

10. *Emphasize an integrated systems model.*

People support most what they believe they have had genuine input in creating. This requires the difficult but necessary task of bringing all of the stakeholders to the table. Stakeholders include: students, teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, law enforcement personnel, after-school and community-based groups, and others. Stakeholders must struggle with questions such as the definition of "fairness," "threat," "consequence," and "change" as these concepts fit into the unique context of each school, school system, and the surrounding community.

11. *All climates of safety ultimately are "local."*

Many local factors contribute to the creation of a culture and climate of safety. These factors include: the leadership–"open door" role of the school principal; "empowered buy-in" of student groups; connections to the local community and its leaders; and the respectful integration into the safe school climates process of "safekeepers," such as parents and law enforcement personnel close to the school.

Schools that have succeeded in creating safe school climates have done so because of their recognition that such climates of safety actually "raise the bar" on sound educational expectations, which, in turn, keep students engaged and learning at high levels. Such schools achieve their aims by realizing that safe school climates are not created overnight. Implementation of the safe school climates process

requires planning and dedicated work. Participants in this process need adequate feedback and evaluative processes to sustain and continually improve educational environments. To work effectively, safe school climates that create relationships of respect and connection between adults and students must be accepted as integral to the mission of threat assessment and management, and understood from "the top down" as integral to the success of the learning experience.

Implementing a Threat Assessment Program

Threat assessment policies and programs work best as components of school violence prevention strategies if these policies and programs are authorized, developed, and implemented by local officials, and developed in consultation with representatives of the broader community. The following course of action should be pursued in establishing a threat assessment approach in a community or school district.

1. **A principal, superintendent, school board member, or other school official initiates a request to develop a process to evaluate and respond to threatening situations. The request is forwarded to the school board or other responsible oversight entity for policy approval.**

Threatening situations might include: threats made directly against students, teachers, or other school officials; threats made indirectly by telephone, in writing, over the Internet or through interpersonal contacts; communications or behaviors suggesting a student's intent to mount an attack at school; and allegations of bomb-making or that a student possesses a firearm.

2. **The school district creates a planning team to develop or further refine a process to identify, assess, and manage threatening situations.**

Members of the team should be drawn from the school district and the community. Team members should include representatives of law enforcement and mental health agencies who work with the schools. Representatives from the school district should include administrators, teachers, attorneys, school security officials, and school psychologists and mental health workers.

The team appointed to develop a process to evaluate threatening situations should determine the status of each of the following:

- *Information-sharing:* What are the existing policies, procedures, and legal parameters in place for access to and sharing of school, law enforcement, and mental health records? The team should ascertain what information concerning students is available; where that information is located; how and under what conditions, that information can be accessed; and who can access available information.

- *Existing policies regarding threats and threatening situations:* The team should review all existing school disciplinary policies, including those related to threats and threatening situations. This review should cover definition of threats and threatening situations and sanctions for engaging in threatening behavior. The team should assess the effectiveness of existing school discipline policies in this area.

- *Existing policies regarding the roles and responsibilities of law enforcement:* The team should review policies that cover when police are to be contacted by the school; what options are available to police officials for intervening in a situation once they are contacted; and interaction of the police and local school officials, such as principals, in responding to and managing threatening situations.

- *Existing approaches to creating and maintaining safe and respectful school climates and cultures:* The team should engage in an assessment of the emotional climate of the school. This assessment should include a review of policies; rules and regulations; and physical aspects of the school that may affect the overall safety and security of the educational institution.

3. **The planning team should determine what policies, rules, regulations, procedures, and/or processes should be revised or created. Some schools already may have policies and protocols in place to deal with certain kinds of threats and threatening behaviors, such as e-mail threats, internet threats, potential suicides, and other behaviors that raise concern about potential violence. In particular, the planning team's deliberations in this area should produce answers to the following questions:**

- What should be the roles and responsibilities of school administrators, teachers, security personnel, and other school officials in responding to threats and threatening situations? When should parents be contacted concerning a threatening situation? Which situations should be handled within the school? Which situations require notification of, and intervention by, law enforcement officials?

- What should be the roles/responsibilities of law enforcement officials in responding to threats and threatening situations in schools?

- Under what conditions will information concerning a student or a threatening situation be shared? What types of information will be shared? With whom will it be shared?

- When should students who engage in threatening behavior be referred to outside services, such as mental health agencies, for assistance? How should referrals to outside agencies be handled?

- What actions should be taken to develop and support climates of safety within the educational institution? What steps could be taken by school officials to encourage students to come forward with concerns about potentially violent situations? What policies or actions would encourage students to bring their problems to the attention of adults? How can school officials and other adults work with students to resolve problems and remedy underlying conditions?

4. **School administrators, teachers, law enforcement officials, parents, representatives of other community agencies and organizations, and representatives of the student body, where appropriate, review and provide feedback on revised and/or new recommended processes for threat assessment. These processes should include recommendations for implementation, training, and the periodic review, evaluation, and updating of the threat assessment program.**

5. **The school board reviews and acts upon recommended changes and additions to the threat assessment program.**

6. **Upon approval by the school board or other appropriate authorities, school officials will implement the threat assessment process.**

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION: THREAT ASSESSMENT AS A DECISION-MAKING TOOL

Developing a strategy to prevent and respond to potential incidents of targeted school violence is a challenging and complex task. There is no single, universal prescription that will be effective in dealing with every situation or crisis that will confront school administrators, law enforcement officials, parents, and other individuals and organizations in the community.

When a student's behavior raises the specter of potential violence, responsible adults will be forced to make judgments about the risk associated with that student's actions and how to respond to that threatening situation. The threat assessment process outlined in this *Guide* will not eliminate the need to make difficult judgments when the actions of an individual suggest that the safety and security of a school is at risk. Instead, the *Guide* is intended to assist officials in implementing a process that will inform these judgments and increase the likelihood that actions based upon these judgments will prevent incidents of targeted violence in schools.

The threat assessment process is rooted in the proposition that each situation of concern should be viewed and assessed individually and that targeted violence is the end result of a discernible process. No two cases involving the potential for targeted school violence are likely to be similar in all aspects. Application of that process is guided by the facts of that situation and carried out through the analysis of information about behaviors and situational references. Instead of basing judgments of risk on student traits or whether that student made specific threatening statements, the threat assessment process focuses upon evaluating that student's behaviors and communications and determining whether those behaviors and communications suggest that the student has the intent and capacity to carry out a school attack.

The work of the Secret Service and the Department of Education in examining the problem of targeted school violence suggests that the threat assessment process can help to develop and maintain key relationships between the school and the community. These relationships are critical elements in creating safe school climates. Schools and communities that think clearly about threat assessment and management will develop relationships, processes, and protocols that will contribute to reducing school violence and to creating safe and secure learning environments in this nation's schools.

Appendix

ANNOTATED RESOURCES

The following section offers suggestions for further reading on specific topics related to responding to threatening situations in schools and to creating safe school climates. Each topic area is accompanied by a brief description of the documents listed within that topic. The list that follows is not intended to be exhaustive or all-inclusive. Instead, the list is offered as a starting point for additional reading in selected areas.

Bullying and the Creation of Respectful Climates

The following resources provide specific information on bullying behavior and more general information on the experiences of boys and young men in school and in society. The work by Olweus and related work by Graham and Juvonen reviews bullying behavior in schools. Olweus pioneered research on bullying behavior and provides an overview of decades of research on this topic. "Bullying behavior among U.S. youth" provides recent data on the prevalence of bullying behavior in America. The three books by William Pollack and his colleagues describe Pollack's work talking with boys and young men about their experiences in school and in the community. *Real boys* and *Real boys' voices* include findings from Pollack's work on the culture of boyhood in America; review certain assumptions that parents and other adults may bring to their interactions with boys and young men; and include suggested approaches and strategies for improving relationships with boys and young men. *Real boys workbook* contains specific exercises for parents and teachers to help enhance their interactions and communications with boys and young men. Olweus and colleagues' and Pollack and colleagues' work encourages parents, school leaders, and others to work to create respectful and safe school climates.

- Graham, S, & Juvonen, J. (2001). An Attributional Approach to Peer Victimization. In Juvonen, J. Graham, S. (eds.), *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized, pp. 49-72*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at School: What we know and what we can do.* New York: Blackwell.
- lweus, D. (1996, Spring). Bully/Victim Problems at School: Facts and Effective Intervention. *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 15-22.*
- Nansel, T., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R., Ruan, J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying behavior among U.S. youth. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 285,* pp. 2094-2100.
- Pollack, W. (1998). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood.* New York: Henry Holt, Inc.
- Pollack, W., & Cushman, K. (2001). *Real boys workbook*. New York: Villard.
- Pollack, W., & Shuster, T. (2000). *Real boys' voices.* New York: Random House.

Information-Sharing / Legal Issues

These resources provide an overview of the issues impacting the sharing of information about students in schools. *Sharing information* is a primer on the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the federal regulation governing protection of educational records and other student information in schools. It includes the full text of FERPA, as well as detailed explanations on exceptions to FERPA restrictions. "Establishing and maintaining interagency information sharing" provides guidance on developing and implementing appropriate policies to permit or facilitate sharing of information about juveniles across agencies. *School violence: Sharing student information* provides further information on the protections afforded to student information and reviews recent state legislative initiatives designed to make sharing information about students easier to accomplish.

- Medaris, M.L., Campbell, E., & James, B. (1997, June). *Sharing information: A guide to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and participation in juvenile justice programs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile

Justice and Delinquency Prevention and U.S. Department of Education, Family Policy Compliance Office.

Please also see the following Web site for updates on FERPA regulations since the 1997 publication of this document:

http://www.ed.gov/offices/OM/fpco

- Slayton, J. (2000, March). Establishing and maintaining interagency information sharing. *JAIBG Bulletin*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Thomerson, J. (2001, May). *School violence: Sharing student information*. Denver, Colo.: National Conference of State Legislatures.

School Violence and Crime

As of the publication date of this *Guide*, the resources included below represent some of the most recent data and statistics on violence, crime, and other behavior in American schools as well as in the community. Since currently there is no one central mechanism for reporting violence and crime perpetrated and experienced by youth in American schools, these reports collectively represent a fairly comprehensive picture of school violence and crime in America.

- Anderson, M., et. al. (2001). School-associated Violent Deaths in the United States, 1994-1999. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 286,* 2695-2702 (2001)
- Kaufman, P., et. al. *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2000*. U. S. Department of Education (NCES 2001-017) and U. S. Department of Justice (NCJ-184176): Washington, D. C. (2000). Available at: http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/quarterly/winter/elementary/e_section4.html
- National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Committee on Law and Justice and Board on Children, Youth, and Families. (2001). *Juvenile Crime, Juvenile Justice*. Panel on Juvenile Crime: Prevention, Treatment, and Control. McCord, J., et. al. (Eds.). National Academy Press: Washington, D. C.
- Snyder, H.N., & Sickmund, M. (1999). *Juvenile offenders and victims: 1999 National Report*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency

Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. Available at: http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/nationalreport99/index.html.

- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2002). *Digest of Education Statistics 2000*; Washington D.C.: Authors
- U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice (1999). *1999 Annual Report on School Safety*. Washington, D.C.: Authors.

Risk Assessment and General Aggression / Violence

"Assessing violence risk among youth" presents an overview of the known risk factors for general aggression and violence among youth. It summarizes the current scientific knowledge base on the topic and includes recommendations for clinicians tasked with assessing the risk of general aggression and violence (i.e. not targeted violence) in youth. *Manual for the SAVRY* presents a similar review of risk factors for general aggression and violence in youth and provides specific guidance and a structured assessment tool to help guide clinicians' assessment of risk for general aggression and violence within a particular individual (youth).

- Borum, R. (2000). Assessing violence risk among youth. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 56,* 1263-1288.
- Borum, R., Bartel, P., & Forth, A. (2002). *Manual for the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY).* Tampa: Fla.: University of South Florida.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2001). *Youth violence: A report of the Surgeon General.* Rockville, Md.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health. Available at: http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence

Threat Assessment and Targeted Violence

The following documents represent a sample of information currently available on various types of targeted violence and on threat assessment as a strategy to help prevent targeted attacks. "Defining an approach for evaluating targeted violence" is an academic paper that presents the general concepts of threat assessment and 10 key questions that investigators and others can use when gathering information about someone who may pose a threat of targeted violence. "Assassination in the United States" is also an academic paper that reviews the Exceptional Case Study Project and presents the study's findings. *Protective intelligence & threat assessment investigations* is a guide for state and local law enforcement officials, and others with protective

responsibilities. It sets forth guidelines for developing a threat assessment capacity for targeted violence against protected officials and others in a manner similar to that contained in this *Guide*. It also includes findings from the Exceptional Case Study Project. "Threat assessment" provides a brief and straightforward description of the threat assessment approach. "Evaluating risk for targeted violence in schools" presents and compares the various assessment approaches schools currently have available for gauging the threat that a particular student may pose. The paper reviews profiling, structured clinical assessment, automated decision-making (e.g., the use of software or Web-based decision tools), and threat assessment.

- Defining an approach for evaluating risk of targeted violence. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law, 17,* 323-337. Available at http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac.htm
- Fein, R.A., & Vossekuil, B.V. (1999). Assassination in the United States: An operational study of recent assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers. *Journal of Forensic Sciences, 44,* 321-333. Available at http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac.htm
- Fein, R.A., & Vossekuil, B. (1998). *Protective intelligence & threat assessment investigations: A guide for state and local law enforcement officials* (NIJ/OJP/DOJ Publication No. 170612). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Available at http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac.htm
- Fein, R.A., Vossekuil, B., & Holden, G.A. (1995, September). Threat assessment: An approach to prevent targeted violence. *National Institute of Justice: Research in Action,* 1-7. Available at http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac.htm
- Reddy, M., Borum, R., Berglund, J., Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., & Modzeleski, W. (2001). Evaluating risk for targeted violence in schools: Comparing risk assessment, threat assessment, and other approaches. *Psychology in the Schools, 38,* 157-172. Available at http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac.htm.

Web Sites

United States Department of Education www.ed.gov

United States Secret Service

www.secretservice.gov

Author Brief Bios

Robert A. Fein, Ph.D.

Robert Fein is a forensic psychologist who is a director of the National Violence Prevention and Study Center. Dr. Fein has worked with the U.S. Secret Service for the last twenty years in the area of threat assessment. Recently, he has served as Co-Director of the Secret Service Safe School Initiative. Together with Bryan Vossekuill, Dr. Fein is author of *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials* and of other publications concerning targeted violence. He holds appointments at Harvard Medical School and the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Dr. Fein can be reached at rfein@nvpsc.org.

Bryan Vossekuil

Bryan Vossekuil is a director of the National Violence Prevention and Study Center. He retired as a special agent in the U.S. Secret Service, where he served as executive director of the National Threat Assessment Center. He also served as co-director of both the Secret Service's Safe School Initiative and Exceptional Case Study Project. He has a special interest in the assessment and management of threatening persons and situations and has co-authored a number of publications on threat assessment. He can be reached at bvossekuil@nvpsc.org.

William S. Pollack, Ph.D.

Dr. Pollack is Director of the Centers for Men and Young Men at McLean Hospital. He is Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and is a Director of the National Violence Prevention and Study Center, as well as founder and Director of the REAL BOYS(R) Educational Programs. He has

served on the U.S. Presidential Initiative, the National Campaign Against Youth Violence and is a consultant to the United States Secret Service, including its collaborative Safe Schools Initiative with the U.S. Department of Education. The author of three popular books re-framing the roles of boys in the family: Real Boys, Real Boys' Voices and the Real Boys Workbook, his work has also focused on the roles of violence and depression in American society, the impact of emotional cognition/roles within organizations--most especially in creating "safe climates" in schools & the workplace, and male-female relationships. He may be reached at: wpollack@williampollack.com.

Randy Borum, Psy.D.

Dr. Randy Borum is Associate Professor in the Department of Mental Health Law & Policy at University of South Florida. He is a licensed psychologist and is Board-Certified (ABPP) and fellowship-trained in Forensic Psychology. He has served a sworn police officer for municipal departments in Maryland and Florida, and is currently a consultant to the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center, where he worked on the Safe School Initiative, and Advisory Board Member for the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit.

William Modzeleski

Bill Modzeleski currently serves as the Director of the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, at the U.S. Department of Education. Mr. Modzeleski has over 30 years of experience working on issues related to the care and well being of youth. He has served in several capacities at the U.S. Department of Justice and at the local levels. President Bush recently named Mr. Modzeleski as a Meritorious Executive for his work in the area of school safety.

Marisa Reddy, Ph.D.

Marisa Reddy is the chief research psychologist and research coordinator

for the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center. Dr. Reddy oversees all research conducted by the U.S. Secret Service on targeted violence and threat assessment, and serves as Co-Director of the Safe School Initiative. Dr. Reddy is co-author of "Evaluating Risk for Targeted Violence in Schools: Comparing Risk Assessment, Threat Assessment, and Other Approaches," as well as additional publications on the prevention of various types of targeted violence. Dr. Reddy can be reached at ntac@secretservice.gov.

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